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ELI'S CHILDREN.

VOL. II.

SALISBURY
Working Men's Liberal Club.

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ELI'S CHILDREN.

The Chronicles of an Unhappy Family.

BY

GEORGE MANVILLE FENN,

AUTHOR OF

"THE VICAR'S PEOPLE;" "THE PARSON O' DUMFORD," ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOLUME II.

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ELI'S CHILDREN.

BOOK I.—(*CONTINUED.*)

CHAPTER XX.

JOCK MORRISON'S THREAT.

THE visit to town was but a flying one upon this occasion. The poverty at the rectory did not seem to be extreme, for the horses and carriage were sent up for the fortnight's stay, and Mrs. Mallow had her interview with the new specialist, who talked to her as some specialists do talk, and then she returned to the house taken for the short stay, and her girls had the use of the carriage.

It was a curious thing, and at first it had

passed almost unnoticed, but just before the Mallows left the rectory, undergoing a process of smoking out, Frank and Cyril being the smoke producers, Jock Morrison, whose three months had been over now for some time, appeared once more in the neighbourhood of Lawford.

Julia and Cynthia met him one day by Tom Morrison's cottage, leaning against the doorpost and talking to little Polly.

He had stared hard at them and then slouched away, Polly apologizing for his presence.

"You see, Miss Julia, Miss Cynthia, he's my husband's own brother, and we don't want him to feel that we turn our backs upon him."

"No, of course not," said Cynthia, "but I wish he would keep away;" and then they had a long chat with the little wife. She looked very pretty and pathetic in her deep mourning, and they parted very tenderly, Julia's heart bleeding for the stricken woman.

"I'd have given anything to have asked her to show me where they buried poor baby," said Cynthia, "but I dare not even allude to it."

"No, of course not," said Julia, with a shiver. "It was very sad; I can't bear to think of it at all. Keep close to me, Cynthy," she whispered.

They had suddenly come upon Jock Morrison, smoking his pipe as he sat upon a stile by the side of the lane, and as they passed he stared hard at Julia and laughed in a half mocking way.

"How dare he stare at us like that!" said Cynthia haughtily, and then she began chatting about Polly Morrison's trouble, and wishing that papa had not been so strict, and the meeting was forgotten till, three days later, when they reached London, and as they got out of the train, Julia started, for there, leaning against a barrier with his hands in his pockets, was Jock Morrison again.

The next day she saw him staring up at the house, and day after day afterwards she was sure to encounter his bold fierce gaze somewhere or another, till she grew quite nervous, telling her sister that she was certain that the man was meditating some form of revenge against their father for sending him to prison.

“Nonsense!” cried Cynthia. “Papa is a magistrate, and he would not dare.”

Back at Lawford, and they were free of the incubus, in fact Jock Morrison passed out of mind; for in spite of his breathing out threatenings of poverty, the Reverend Eli Mallow, now that he found his eldest son had not come to him for money, had opened the rectory doors to receive visitors.

“We must entertain a little while we are down here, my dear, for the girls’ sake. Perhaps it is as well too for the boys.”

“Yes, dear,” said Mrs. Mallow, looking up from her sofa with her customary patient smile; and the company arrived, and was

entertained in a manner that made Fullerton hope that no one would suffer for it, that was all he could say.

Among the guests who had been staying at the rectory were the Perry-Mortons—the Perry-Mortons in society meaning Mr. Perry-Morton and his two sisters, for though it was believed that they had, or had had, a father and mother, the seniors were never even heard of, much less seen. Ill-natured people said that Perry-Morton the elder had been a pawnbroker who had made money largely. Be that as it may, Perry-Morton the younger was very rich, and never mentioned any relatives but his sisters.

Lord Artingale was there from Gatton every day, but his friend and companion, James Magnus, was in the North sketching, so the young man, having no restraining arm on which to lean, fell more in love as fast as he could with little Cynthia.

Claudine Perry-Morton—by the way, there

was a good deal of familiar nicknaming at the house of the Perry-Mortons, Mr. Perry-Morton having been known to call Claudine—Bessy, and the younger sister—Faustine Judy. But that was in the privacy of their home life, and showed the simplicity and deep affection of their natures.

Claudine Perry-Morton had made a dead set at the young nobleman, but finding at once that her chance was *nil*, she graciously made way for her sister, who sang “Jock of Hazeldine” at him, in a very deep contralto voice, and with a graceful stoop over the piano; but Faustine Perry-Morton was woman of the world enough to see that Lord Artingale’s thoughts ran in quite another direction, so she also resigned herself to circumstances, and thought him a man of exceedingly low tastes.

So all the smiles and sweetness of the sisters were lavished upon the rectory girls for their brother’s sake. Nothing particular was said, but it soon became evident that Perry-Morton

found favour with the Rector, and it was quite understood that the wealthy visitor would, sooner or later, propose for his elder daughter's hand.

She was nearly as bright at this time as her sister, and Artingale declared that she was the dearest girl he knew, not from any amiable passages between them, but because she laughingly helped him to pleasant little *tête-à-têtes* with her sister, especially when they were out riding; horse exercise and good long gallops being a great deal in vogue, when the weather was mild and clear.

Lord Artingale would canter over from Gatton, sending two or three or more horses by his grooms, an arrangement highly approved of by Frank and Cyril Mallow, who were very civil to him, though in private they compared notes, and said that he would be an awful fool if he had not borne a title and kept such good cigars.

Sometimes the Rector joined the equestrian

parties upon a quiet cob, but he generally turned homeward after two or three miles, either to make a call or two at the outlying farms, or to meet the carriage. Then, to make things pleasant, poor Julia talked art on horseback with Mr. Perry-Morton, while her sister and Lord Artingale had a brisk canter over some heath, and the groom behind sat and grinned.

“Talk about the *guy*’nor,” said the last-named individual, as he returned to the stables with the horses, and compared notes with Lord Artingale’s man, “he is a sight on horseback. That there old cob holds him on a’most. But if you want to see riding you should go behind that there Perry-Morton.”

This was in the midst of a chorus of hissing from the helpers, who were rubbing down the horses after one of the morning rides.

“He do look a rum un,” said one of the men.

“Look !” said the groom ; “he *is* a rum un. He gets them little thin legs of his one on each side of the horse, and keeps yer altering his

sterrups for ever so long. Now they're too long, and now they're too short, and when we starts he holds his reins one in each hand, and bends forward so that if his horse didn't have on a martingale he'd always be finding his nose between its ears."

"Can't he ride, then?"

"Ride! Yes; like a sack o' sharps on a miller's pony. It's freezing work going out with him, worse than with the guv'nor, for he keeps his 'oss at a walk the whole time. Lor', I'd give something to see him on his lordship's *Mad Sal*."

But the groom was not destined to see Mr. Perry-Morton upon that greyhound-framed hunter, which was full of fire and fidget with every one but Cynthia, who could have curbed her with a silken thread, for that gentleman was an admirer of repose even on horseback, and would only ride the quietest horse he could hire at the King's Head, although Lord Artingale offered him the pick of his little stud.

Repose, too, gave him so many excellent opportunities for putting forward his suit with Julia, upon whom he beamed in a mezzo-tinto style, the lady hardly realizing his meaning, only thinking him very absurd, and laughingly telling her sister that she owed her a long debt of gratitude for giving her so many opportunities for a long canter—one of those delightful long canters from which Cynthia used to come back with a delicious glow upon her cheeks, and with eyes that literally sparkled with health and pleasure combined.

“Looking like a wild gal,” Mr. Jabez Fullerton said, as he stood at his shop door. “I declare it’s immoral, that’s what it is; a parson’s daughter gadding about like a jockey, Smithson; it’s disgusting.”

“Yes,” said Mr. Smithson, who was calculating how many yards, at how much a yard, were in Cynthia’s well-fitting riding-habit.

“There’s a horse—look at it—for a young gal to ride! Well, all I can say is that I

hope his lordship means to marry her. I never saw such goings on."

"That there habit do fit well though, I must say that," said Smithson.

"Fit?" said Fullerton. "Hah! The rectory's a disgrace!"

But it so happened that riding was not always the order of the day. Long brisk walks were taken at times, much to the bemiring of Mr. Perry-Morton's patent leather shoes; and upon one of these occasions it had been arranged that Julia and Cynthia were to make a call or two upon some of the poor cottagers, who had been rather neglected during the past two weeks. Lord Artingale was going to ride over, and he and Mr. Perry-Morton were to bring forward the ladies to meet them, if the Misses Perry-Morton could walk so far.

"Why, Julie, it's quite a treat to be alone once more," said Cynthia, merrily, as they walked briskly along the sandy lanes, calling at first one cottage and then another.

“Treat!” said her sister, smiling, “I thought——”

“Hush! I won’t be teased. But, Julie dear, I won’t be a hypocrite to you. I do tease him and laugh at him, but he *is* nice, and I think I’m beginning to like him ever so.”

“I like him very, very much,” said Julia, naïvely. “He’s a very pleasant, manly fellow.”

“Yes, isn’t he, dear? But, Julie, it’s too bad, I know, of me to leave you so long with that dreadful bore. What does he say to you?”

“Say!” said Julia, with a smile; “really I hardly know. Talks about art and nature’s colour, and asks me if I do not find a want of thoroughness in our daily life.”

“Thoroughness! why that’s what his sisters are always talking about. I think it thorough nonsense. Oh, I shall be so glad when they’re gone.”

“Yes, it will be nicer,” said Julia, thought-

fully ; " but papa seems to like them very much."

" Yes, isn't it extraordinary?" cried Cynthia. " He wants papa to take a house in town, and to furnish it upon plans designed by him. I heard them talking about it, and papa seems to be guided by him in everything. And what do you think?"

" I don't know, dear."

" I'm as good as certain that that wicked Cyril has been borrowing money of Perry-Morton."

" Why do you think that?" said Julia, quickly.

" Because Cyril does not make fun of him a bit, but both he and Frank are wonderfully civil."

Julia sighed.

" Hadn't we better turn back now, dear?"

" Oh, no ! let's go as far as old Mrs. Meadows's, poor old lady ; she'll think we are never coming again."

They walked a few hundred yards farther on, and sat for a quarter of an hour to learn how the poor old lady's jyntes was uncommon painful just now, thanky, and that she hadn't seen them since before Christmas, and that it had been the mildest Christmas she had knowed this sixty year; and then the old lady sent her visitors on their return walk, with the cheerful announcement that a green Christmas "allers made a full churchyard, my dears," which well she knowed it to be true.

"Oh, what a dreadful old woman, Julie," cried Cynthia, merrily.

"Poor old thing! but how well she is for eighty."

"No troubles but her jyntes to harass her," laughed Cynthia.

"How long will it be before we meet anybody?"

A much shorter time than they either of them anticipated, for as they turned a bend

in the road, two rough-looking men who had been leaning against a gate came towards them, making no movement to let them pass, but staring offensively.

"Don't be frightened, Julie," whispered Cynthia, with spirit, "I'm not afraid."

She walked on boldly, and darted such an imperious look at the lesser of the two men, that he slunk aside to let her pass, but the other, Jock Morrison, stood his ground. He stared in a peculiar, half-smiling way at Julia, making her shrink aside, and following her up, as, turning pale, her lips parting, and with dilated eyes, she felt as it were fascinated by his gaze, shuddering the next moment as he exclaimed with a coarse laugh—

"Bob, old matey, I mean to have this girl."

CHAPTER XXI.

AT KILBY FARM.

“WELL—well—well—well,” said Mrs. Portlock, folding her apron full of pleats, as Luke Ross sat talking to her for a while, and ended by telling her his intentions for the future. “Barrister, eh? Well, of all the trades I ever heard tell of——but can barristers make a living?”

“Yes, and a good one, too,” said Luke, laughing.

“Then you are not going to take to the school after all?”

“No, I have quite altered my plans, and I hope all will turn out for the best.”

“Ah, I hope so, I’m sure,” said Mrs. Port-

lock, smoothing down her black silk dress, and then arranging a necklace of oblong amber beads, which she wore on market-days, one which bore a striking resemblance to a string of bilious beetles. "But what does your father say?"

"I have not told him my plans yet, for they have only been made since the governor's meeting."

"Well, Luke Ross," said Mrs. Portlock, in a resigned fashion, "I'm sure I don't wish you any harm."

"I'm sure you do not," he said, laughing.

"Indeed I do not," she continued: "but, for my part, I think you had a great deal better have kept to your father's trade. Such a business as that is not to be picked up every day. But there, I suppose you know best."

"Of course he does," said the Churchwarden, who heard the latter part of her sentence. "You let Luke Ross alone for that. His head's screwed on the right way."

"Don't be so foolish, Joseph," cried Mrs. Portlock. "Do talk sense. Has Mr. Cyril Mallow gone?"

"Yes, he's gone back home," said the farmer.

"Why didn't you ask him to stay and have a bit of dinner with us?"

"Because I didn't want him, mother. He only walked home with me to ask about a bit o' rabbit shooting."

"But still, it would have been civil to ask him to stop. It's market-day, and there's the hare you shot on Friday, and a bit o' sirloin."

"Tchah! he wouldn't have cared to stay. He dines late and fashionable-like at home."

"I'll be bound to say he'd have been very glad to stop," said Mrs. Portlock, bridling. "Fashionable, indeed! He got no fashionable dinners when he was working his way home at sea, nor yet when he was out in the bush."

“Where he had much better have stayed—eh, Luke?” said the farmer. “He does no good but idle about here.”

“Idle, indeed!” cried Mrs. Portlock, taking up the cudgels, rather indignantly, on the young man’s behalf. “It might be idling if it was Luke Ross here, but Mr. Cyril Mallow’s a gentleman and a gentleman’s son, and he has a right to work when he likes and leave off when he likes.”

“Oh! has he?” said the Churchwarden, smiling at their visitor, as much as to say, ‘Now, just you listen.’ “Well, I’m not a learned man, like Luke Ross here, who has got his Bible at his tongue’s end.”

“As every man who calls himself a good man ought to,” said Mrs. Portlock, tartly. “Sage!”

“Yes, aunt,” came from the next room, where the speaker could hear every word.

“Tell them to take the dinner in directly. And, for my part, Joseph, I think if you’d

read your Bible a little more o' Sundays you'd be a better man."

"You wouldn't like me so well if I was a better man, old lady," he laughed; "but, as I was going to say, when I used to read of such things I got it into my head that the first specimen of a man as was made was a working man, to till the ground, and not idle and loaf about, and eat the fruit and shoot the rabbits in the Garden of Eden."

"For shame, father, to talk in that way!" cried the lady. "And I wonder that you speak so disrespectfully of Mr. Cyril Mallow. For my part, I think he's a very nice, gentlemanly young fellow, and it's too bad for people to be always sneering about him as they are."

"And, for my part," said the Churchwarden, good-humouredly, "I'm a bit of a Radical, and don't believe in taking off your hat to a man because he happens to have a few thousand pounds more than one's got oneself."

If he's a wonderful clever chap, with more brains than I've got, why, I do look up to him; but I'm not going down on my knees to a set of folks who yawn through their lives, doing nothing, except telling you by word and look that they are a better class of people than you are; and as for Master Cyril Mallow, he's a well-built, strapping young fellow, who can talk well, and shoot well, but if he had happened to be my son, instead of old Mallow's, I'd have licked him into a different shape to what he's in now, aye, and his brother too, or I'd have known the reason why. Dinner in, my lass? That's well. Come along, Luke. Tchah! nonsense! you shall stay. You can tell the old man your reasons better when you've got a bit of roast beef under your waistcoat, and some of my ale. Why, Sage, lass, what ails you? Your face is as white as a bit o' dough."

"Oh, nothing, uncle, nothing," she replied, forcing a smile, as she hurried to a tall press

to get out a napkin for their visitor, and soon after they were seated at the hospitable meal, which was more bounteous on a market-day, the nearness of the farm to the town making it always probable that the Churchwarden might bring up a friend.

But Luke Ross was the only stranger on that occasion, and he sat opposite Sage, whose countenance, though less troubled than when she had overheard her uncle's words, was lacking in its ordinary composure.

Luke saw this, and attributed it to their conversation, and the interest she took in his affairs. Her aunt saw it, too, and, with the idea of comforting her niece, kept turning the conversation to the Rector and his family, but not to do any good, for out of mere contrariety, and with a twinkle in his eye as he glanced at Luke, the Churchwarden set to and roundly abused the Rector and his sons for their ways.

"Come, Luke," he said, "you are not

making half a meal. I suppose by and by, sir, you will be as fashionable as Master Cyril Mallow, and won't eat a bit at dinner-time without calling it lunch. Ha, ha, ha!"

"There, do have done, Joseph," cried Mrs. Portlock. "What have you got to laugh at now?"

"I was thinking of the horse-whipping I gave the young dogs—aye, it's twelve or fourteen years ago now—that night I caught them in the orchard."

"There, do let bygones be bygones, Joseph," cried Mrs. Portlock, sharply. "Boys will be boys. I'll be bound to say you stole apples yourself when you were young."

"Aye, that I did, and got thrashed for it, too. But I must say that Cyril Mallow don't bear any malice for what I did."

A regular duel was fought over that meal between the heads, Sage hardly raising her eyes, but looking more and more troubled as the Mallow attack and defence went on,

while Luke Ross was so intent upon his own thoughts that he hardly heard a word.

It was with quite a feeling of relief, then, that Sage heard her uncle say—

“I like parson, not as a parson, but as a man: for the way in which he has tended that poor sick woman’s an honour to him; but, as for his way of bringing up children, why, if I had carried on my farm in such a fashion I should have been in the Court o’ Bankruptcy years ago. Best thing Mallow could do would be to put the fellow with me to learn farming, and me have the right to do what I liked with him, and——five-and-twenty to two? Is it, my dear? I didn’t know it was so late———and make us truly thankful, Amen.”

There was a general scrooping of chairs after this condensed grace, Sage hurrying off to put on her hat and jacket, and her aunt running after her to say, in a mysterious whispered confidence—

“Don’t you take any notice of uncle, my dear. He don’t mean half he says.”

“You’ll walk back with Sage, of course, Luke?” said the Churchwarden, quietly, as he drew his chair to the fire for his after-dinner pipe. “Well, my boy, I think you’re right about what you settled; but I suppose I had something to do with your altering your mind?”

“Yes, sir, I must own to that.”

“Well,” said the Churchwarden, thoughtfully, “I hope it’s for the best; I meant it to be. You’ll go back to London, then, soon?”

“Almost directly, sir, to begin working hard.”

“That’s right, my boy. I believe in work. Come over here whenever you are down at Lawford. I shall be very glad to see you, my lad, very.”

Then, pulling out his watch, he consulted it, and went on chatting for a few minutes as if

to keep Luke from speaking about the subject near to his heart, but at last he broke in—

“I need hardly say, sir, that I go meaning to work up to the point you named, and——”

“Yes, yes, yes, my lad ; let that rest. Let's see how things go. You're both young,” he cried, pulling out his big silver watch once more. “I say, mother,” he shouted, “tell Sage that Luke's waiting to walk back with her. She'll be late for school.”

Then like a chill to Luke Ross came back Mrs. Portlock's voice—

“Sage ? Oh, she went out by the back way ten minutes ago.”

CHAPTER XXII.

CYNTHIA'S KNIGHTS.

THAT was all—those few insolent, grossly-insulting words — and then the big fellow stood staring after the frightened girls.

“Take my hand, Julia,” whispered the younger sister ; and if, as we read in the old novelists, a glance would kill, the flash of indignant lightning that darted from her bright eyes would have laid Jock Morrison dead in the road.

But, powerful as are the effects of a lady's eyes, they had none other here than to make the great picturesque fellow smile at her mockingly before turning his hawk-like gaze on the frightened girl who clung to her sister's hand as they hurried away.

"Has he gone, Cynthia?" whispered Julia, at the end of a few moments.

"I don't know. I can't hear them, and I won't look back, or they'll think we are afraid——and we are not."

"I am—horribly afraid," said Julia, in a choking voice.

"I'm not," said Cynthia. "A nasty, rude, impudent pig that he is. Oh, if I were a man, I'd whip him till he lay down on the ground and begged for mercy. To insult two inoffensive girls like that! Harry shall beat him well, that he shall, or I'll never speak to him again."

"Make haste," whispered Julia. "Let's run."

"I won't run," cried Cynthia. "I wouldn't run away from the biggest man that ever lived. I never heard of such a thing. Oh, how cross papa will be."

"We had better not tell him," said Julia, faintly; and her face was deadly pale.

“Not tell papa? Why, you foolish little coward, Julie! But only to think of the insufferable impudence of the wretch. I wish he had said it to me.”

“No, no: don’t wish that,” cried Julia, excitedly. “It is too horrible. Oh, Cynthia dear, I shall dream of that man.”

“You shan’t do anything of the kind,” cried her sister, whose eyes sparkled and face flushed with excitement. “Such nonsense! Two unprotected maidens walking through the forest met a wicked ogre, and he opened his ugly great mouth, and gaped as he showed his big white teeth like a lion, and then he said, I am going to gobble up the prettiest of those two little maids; and then they ran away, and a gallant knight coming along, they fled to him for help, and fell upon their poor knees in a wet place, and said, ‘Oh, brave and gallant paladin, go and smite down that wicked ogre, and we will give you smiles, and gloves to wear in your helm, and tie scarves round your

waist, and if you will promise not to eat us, you shall some day have one of us for a pet !' And the name of the gallant knight was Sir Perrino Mortoni, and——"

"Oh pray be quiet, Cynthy, I feel so upset you cannot tell."

"Stuff and nonsense ! Don't interrupt my story. The ogre has gone."

"I shall always be afraid of meeting that man."

"What, after the gallant knight has killed him ? Oh, I see, you are afraid that Sir Perrino would not slay him, but would bind him in chains, and keep him at his castle for an artist's model. Then we will appeal to another knight, Lord Harry the Saucy, and he shall do the deed. Where is the gallant I wis not," she added, laughing.

"I know who he is," said Julia, who was trembling still.

"So do I," said Cynthia, merrily. "Well, never mind, my darling sissy ; don't let a

thing like that upset you. Come : be brave. They are gone now, and we shall never see them again."

"Never see them again," said Julia, with a wild look in her eye. "That man will haunt me wherever I go."

"Will he, dear?" said Cynthia, merrily ; "then the gallant knight shall not quite kill him, though I don't believe in haunting ghosts. Here they are."

"Cynthia!" gasped Julia, with a cry of horror.

"I don't mean the ogres, you little coward ; I mean the gallant knights."

"Why, we began to think we had missed you," cried Lord Artingale, who, with Mr. Perry-Morton, met them at a turn of the road, the latter gentleman's patent leather shoes being a good deal splashed, in spite of the care with which he had picked his way.

"Oh, Mr. Perry-Morton," cried Cynthia, ignoring Artingale, and, with a mischievous

light in her eye, addressing their artistic friend, "my sister has been so shamefully insulted by a great big man."

"Who? where? my dear Miss Julia? Where is the scoundrel?" cried Perry-Morton, excitedly.

"Just down the road a little way," said Cynthia. "I hope you will go and beat him well."

"A big scoundrel of a fellow?" cried Mr. Perry-Morton.

"Yes, and he looks like a gipsy," said Cynthia, innocently. "He said something so insulting to my sister."

"Hush, pray, Cynthia," cried the latter, faintly.

"Oh, poor girl, she is going to faint. Miss Mallow, pray look up. I am here. Take my arm. Let me hasten with you home. This scoundrel shall be pursued, and brought to justice."

"I am better now," said Julia, speaking

more firmly. "No, thank you, Mr. Perry-Morton, I can walk well enough."

"Oh, I cannot leave you like this, dear Miss Julia," whispered Perry-Morton, while Cynthia's eyes were sparkling with malicious glee, as she turned them upon Artingale, whose face, however, startled her into seriousness, as he caught her arm, gripping it so hard that it gave her pain.

"Tell me, Cynthia," he said, hoarsely, "what sort of a fellow was this?"

"A big, gipsy-looking man, and there was a dirty-looking fellow with him," faltered the girl, for her lover's look alarmed her. "But stop, Harry; what are you going to do?"

"Break his cursed neck—if I can," cried Artingale, in a low, angry growl.

"No, no: don't go," she whispered, catching at him. "You may be hurt."

"One of us will be," he said, hoarsely.

"But, Harry, please!"

She looked at him so appealingly that he took her hands in his.

“Cynthia—my darling!” he whispered; and if they had been alone he would have caught her in his arms.

But they were not alone, and bending down he whispered—

“You have made me so happy, but you would not have me be a cur. Take your sister home.”

Without another word he turned and started off down the lane at a trot, Cynthia watching him till he was out of sight.

“Oh, Harry! If you are hurt!” she whispered to herself; and then, recalling her sister’s trouble, she ran to her side, where Perry-Morton was making a pretence of affording support that was not required.

“We can soon get home, Mr. Perry-Morton,” said Cynthia, with the malicious look coming back into her eyes, and chasing away one that

was very soft and sweet. "Wouldn't you like to go after Lord Artingale?"

"What! and leave you two unprotected?" said the apostle, loudly. "No, I could not, to save my life."

He did not, but attended the ladies right up to the rectory, sending their father into a fury, and then leading a party of servants to the pursuit of the tramps, as they were dubbed, but only to meet Lord Artingale at the end of a couple of hours returning unsuccessful from his chase.

For he had not seen either of the fellows, from the fact that as soon as the ladies had gone they had quietly entered the wood, to lie down amongst the mossy hazel stubbs, from which post of vantage they had seen the young man go by.

"Hadn't we better hook it, Jock?" said the lesser vagabond.

"Hook it? No. What for? We haven't done nothing agen the lor."

There was hot indignation at the rectory,

and Frank and Cyril went straight to Tom Morrison's cottage, frightening the wheelwright's wife, and making her look paler as she took refuge with Budge in the back, only coming forward after repeated summonses, and then keeping the girl with her, as she said, truthfully, that Jock Morrison had not been there for days.

"What's the matter?" said Tom, coming from his workshop, and looking sternly at the two visitors.

"Matter!" cried Frank, fiercely; "we want that brother of yours; he has been insulting my sister."

"Then you had better find him and punish him," said Tom, coldly.

"Where is he?"

"You are a parson's sons," said Tom, bitterly, "and ought to know Scripture. 'Am I my brother's keeper?'"

"Look here, you Tom Morrison," cried Frank, "no insolence; I've only just come

back home, but while I stay I'll not have my sisters insulted by a blackguard family who have got a hold in the parish, and do it out of spite because my father could not act as they wanted."

"Out of my place!" roared Tom, fiercely. "How dare you bring up that, you coward!"

"Tom! Tom! oh, for my sake, pray!" cried Polly, throwing herself upon his breast just as he was about to seize Cyril, who had stepped before his brother.

"Well, for thy sake, yes," said Tom, passing his arm round his wife. "Frank and Cyril Mallow, don't come to my place again, or there may be mischief."

"Do you dare to threaten us, you dog?" cried Frank.

"He ought to know what a magistrate's power——" began Cyril, but he glanced at Polly and checked himself. "Here, come away, Frank. Look here, Tom Morrison, where is your brother Jock?"

"I don't know," said Tom, sternly, "and if I did I should not tell you. This is my house, gentlemen, and I want neither truck nor trade with you and yours."

"I'll have you both flogged," cried Frank. "A pretty thing that two ladies can't go along the lanes without being insulted! By G—d, if——"

"Look here," said Tom Morrison, stoutly, "who are you and yours that they are not to be spoken to? How long is it since a respectable girl couldn't hardly walk along one of our lanes for fear of being insulted by the parson's sons? I tell you——"

"Tom! Tom!" moaned Polly, "I—I——"

"Hush, bairn!" he whispered, and Frank hustled his brother out of the cottage, angrily threatening punishment to the brothers Morrison before many days were over their heads, and went back to the rectory, where Mr. Perry-Morton informed Lord Artingale, in confidence, that he would have liked to delete

such creatures as that ruffian. They were only blurs, spots, and blemishes upon the face of this beautiful earth, marring its serenity, and stealing space that was the inheritance of those who could appreciate the gift.

"I can handle my fists," said Artingale, in reply, "for we had a good fellow to teach us, and nothing would have given me greater pleasure than to have had ten minutes' interview with that blackguard."

"It is very brave and bold of you," said Mr. Perry-Morton, holding his too fleshy head up with one white hand, as it drooped sideways, and supporting his elbow with another white hand, as he gazed at him with a kindly, patronizing, smiling pity, "but it would be better to hand him over to the police."

"Oh, the police might have had him when I had done with him," said the young man, nodding. "I should have liked to have had my bit of satisfaction first."

The sisters, that is to say, Mr. Perry-

Morton's sisters, wound their arms round each other, the elder laying her head upon her sister's shoulder, so that arms, hair, and dresses were intertwined and mingled into a graceful whole. Doubtless their legs would have been woven into the figure, only they were required to stand on; and then with a series of changes passing over their faces with beautiful regularity, and with wonderful gradations by minor tones or tints, they suggested horror, fear, dread, suffering, pity, pain, with a grand finale representing wakeful repose, as they listened to Cynthia's history of the encounter, while their brother, after gazing at them diagonally through his eyelashes, softly crossed the room, touched the Rector upon the arm, and pointed to the sisterly group with a smile of satisfied affection.

"Heaven has its reflections upon earth," he said softly, "and the poetic mind reads rapture in angelic form," he added, with a fat smile of serene satisfaction and repose.

“Quite so,” said the Rector, and he balanced his double eyeglass upon his nose ; “but really, Mr. Perry-Morton, I have so many troubles and petty cares upon my mind, that this new one has filled me with indignation, and I hardly know what I say or do. Whether as clergyman or county magistrate, I am sure no one could be so troubled as I have been.”

But the indignation even of a county magistrate availed nothing, although it took the form of a hunt about the place with the resident rural policeman, supplemented by the presence of two more resident rural policemen from two neighbouring villages. Lord Artingale's keepers, too, were admonished to be on the look-out, but Jock Morrison was not seen, though his companion was traced to one or two casual wards, and then seemed to have made for London.

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CHAPTER XXIII.

CLERICAL DIFFICULTIES.

THE Fullerton party proved triumphant in the struggle which ensued, and in spite of the Rector's efforts to produce a better state of things at the boys' school, Mr. Humphrey Bone kept on teaching in his good old-fashioned way—good in the eyes of many of the Lawfordites—when he was sober, but breaking out with a week's drinking fit from time to time, when the school would be either closed or carried on by the principal monitors, Sage Portlock going in from time to time at the Rector's request when the noise became uproarious.

Those who had been the most determined on Bone's retention shut their eyes to these little

weaknesses on the master's part ; and, if the boys were not well taught, the tradesmen's accounts were written in a copperplate hand, while the length and amount of the bill was made less painful to its recipient by finding his name made to look quite handsome with a wonderful flourish which literally framed it in curves—a flourish which it had taken Mr. Bone years to acquire.

The Rector resigned himself in disgust to the state of things, and devoted his attention to the girls' school.

“It can't be helped, Miss Portlock,” he said, with a smile ; “if we cannot make good boys in the place we must make super-excellent girls, and by and by as they grow up they'll exercise their influence on the young men.”

He thought a great deal of his words as he went homewards, according to his custom, with his hands behind his back, holding his walking-cane as if it were a tail, thinking very deeply of his sons, and whether some

day good, true women would have an influence upon their lives and make them better men.

The Rector never knew why the boys laughed at him, setting it down entirely to their rudeness and Humphrey Bone's bad teaching, for no one ever took the trouble to tell him it was on account of that thick black stick he was so fond of carrying, depending from his clasped hands behind.

Upon the present occasion, as he walked homeward, and in fact as he would at any time when excited by his thoughts, he now and then gave the stick a toss up, or a wag sideways, ending with a regular flourish, after the manner of a cow in a summer pasture when much troubled by the flies, adding thereby greatly to the resemblance borne by the stick to a pendent tail.

The Rector was more than usually excited on the morning of his remark to Sage Portlock. There had been something tender and paternal in his way of addressing her, and she had a

good deal filled his thoughts of late. There were several reasons for this.

He had had no right to plan out Sage's future, but somehow he had thoroughly mapped it out long before.

He knew of Luke Ross's attachment to her, and from his position as spiritual head of the parish, it was only natural that he should think of the duty that so often fell to his lot—that of joining couples in the “holy estate of matrimony.”

But a short time back and in Sage's case it all came so natural and easy. Luke Ross had been trained, he was to have the boys' school, he would soon marry her, the schoolhouses would be occupied, and the schools be as perfect under such guidance as schools could be.

Everything had been gliding on beautifully towards a definite end, and then there had come stumbling-blocks. Luke Ross had gone back to town; the girls' schoolhouse remained unoccupied, as Sage went home for the

out of the fireside cupboard, extolling the wine the while.

“I’m sure you’d like it,” she said. “Your son had some only last night, and he said it was better than any sherry he had ever tasted.”

“My son—last night?” said the Rector, quickly. “Which son?”

“Mr. Cyril; he drank four glasses of it, and praised it most highly.”

She poured out a glass, and the Rector drew it to him, and sat gazing at the clear, amber liquid, hesitating as to how he should begin, while Mrs. Portlock stole a glance at the mirror to see if her cap was straight, and wished she had known of her visitor’s coming, so that she might have put on a silk dress, and the cap with the maroon ribbons and the gold acorn.

“Cyril said that he was down the town last night with Frank,” said the Rector to himself. “He fears my words, and he is

playing false, or he would not have been ashamed to answer that he was here."

"How the time seems to fly, Mrs. Portlock!" said the Rector at last, biting his lip with annoyance at the want of originality of the only idea he could set forth.

"Dear me, yes. I was saying so only last week to Mr. Cyril. 'Four months,' I said, 'since you came back;' and he looked up at Sage and said that the time seemed to go like lightning."

"By the way, Mrs. Portlock," said the Rector, hastily, "have you heard from Luke Ross lately?"

"Oh, dear me, no," said the lady, rather sharply. "I never call at the Ross's now."

"I thought, perhaps, the young people might correspond."

"Oh, dear me, no; neither Mr. Portlock nor myself could countenance such a thing as that."

The Rector was at a loss to see the

impropriety of such an intercourse, but he said nothing—he merely bowed.

“That was only a boy-and-girl sort of thing. Our Sage knew Luke Ross from a boy, but now they are grown up, and as Joseph—Mr. Portlock—said they were too young to think about such things as that.”

“But I understood that they were engaged,” said the Rector, who felt startled; and he gazed very anxiously in Mrs. Portlock’s face for her reply.

“Oh, dear me, no, sir, nothing of the kind.”

For want of something to say, the Rector sipped his wine.

“My husband very properly said that under the circumstances no engagement ought to take place, and it was not likely. For my part I don’t agree with the affair at all.”

The Rector felt that his position was growing more unpleasant than ever. He had come to say something, but that something would

not be said; and at last when he did speak his words were very different from what he had intended they should be.

“My son, Cyril, has taken to coming here a good deal lately, Mrs. Portlock,” he said.

“Well, yes, sir,” she said, with a satisfied smile; “he has.”

“I am sorry to have to speak so plainly about him, Mrs. Portlock, but I hope you will not encourage his visits. Cyril has travelled a good deal, and has imbibed, I am afraid, a great deal of careless freedom.”

“Indeed?” said the lady, stiffly.

“I’m afraid that he is too ready to laugh and chat with any girl he meets, and I should be sorry if—er—if——”

“If you mean by that, Mr. Mallow, sir, that you don’t consider our niece good enough for your son,” said Mrs. Portlock, tartly, “please say so downright.”

“I did not wish to imply anything of the kind, Mrs. Portlock,” replied the Rector,

mildly. "I wish merely to warn you against his foolish, frivolous ways."

"If there's a difference at all it's on your side, Mr. Mallow, sir," continued the lady. "Mr. Cyril has been a deal too idle and roving to suit me, while our Sage——"

"Miss Portlock is a most estimable young lady, for whom I entertain the highest respect, Mrs. Portlock," said the Rector, warmly; "and it was on her behalf, knowing as I do how foolish Cyril can be, that I came to speak to you this morning."

"I don't know anything about his foolishness, Mr. Mallow," said the lady, who was growing irate; "but I've got to say this, that he comes here just as if he means something, and if he does not mean anything he had better stop away, and not behave like his brother Frank."

"Exactly so, my dear madam," cried the Rector, eagerly. "I am going to talk seriously to him."

This did not seem to meet the lady's ideas, and she looked hot and annoyed, beginning to stir the fire with a good deal of noise, and setting the poker down more loudly.

"I should be deeply grieved, I am sure, Mrs. Portlock," began the Rector; "it is far from my wish to——really, my dear madam, this is a very unpleasant interview."

The lady said nothing; but she was so evidently of the same opinion that the Rector was glad to rise and offer his hand in token of farewell.

She shook hands, and the visitor left, to hurry home with his black stick hanging behind, and his soul hot within him as he mentally accused Cyril by his folly of getting him into the unpleasant predicament from which he had so lately escaped.

CHAPTER XXIV.

“A ROW.”

“WHERE are you going, Frank?”

“Don’t know; perhaps as far as Lewby. John Berry said he would be glad to show me round his farm.”

“Oh!” exclaimed Cyril, with a meaning look.

“Well, what do you mean by ‘Oh’?” said Frank, roughly.

“Nothing at all, my dear boy—nothing at all,” said Cyril.

“I never grin like an idiot at you when you are going over to Kilby, do I?”

“Oh, no: not at all. It’s all right, I suppose,” laughed Cyril. “But, I say, hadn’t you better be off amongst the blacks? You have grown rather uncivilized lately.”

“Mind your own business,” growled Frank Malló. “I say !”

“Well ?”

“That blackguard regularly frightened Ju. She hasn’t looked the same girl since.”

“No,” said Cyril. “Pity the shooting season’s over.”

“Why ?”

“We might have peppered the blackguard by accident if he had shown himself here again.”

“Master would like to see you, sir, in my mistress’s room,” said the butler, entering the study where the young men were smoking.

“Oh, all right, I’ll come,” said Cyril, impatiently. “Hang it, Frank, if you were half a brother you’d go halves with me, and take me back to your place. I’m sick of this life. There’s a lecture about something, I suppose.”

“Caning, I should think,” said Frank, with a sneering laugh. “There, go and get it over ; and look here, I’ll give up Lewby to-day,

and drive over with you to Gatley. Let's get a game at billiards and dine with Artin-gale. It's no use to have a lord after your sister if you don't make use of him."

"All right. No. I've an engagement to-night."

"Go and keep it then, and be hanged. I shall go to Lewby," growled Frank.

"Blackberrying?" sneered Cyril. "I say, mind you don't 'Rue' going."

"If you say that again, Cil, I'll get up and kick you," growled Frank. "Every fellow isn't such a blackguard as you."

"Oh no," laughed Cyril, "especially not dear brother Frank. There, I'm off."

"You're a beauty, Cil!" growled Frank, and he lit a fresh cigar. "Share! Go halves with me! Ha, ha, ha! I dare say he would. How people do believe in stories of the gold mines. I wonder whether anything is to be made out of that poet fool."

"Want to talk to me, father?" said Cyril,

entering the room where his mother lay upon the couch, with a terrible look of anxiety upon her pallid face. “Oh, let’s see; will my smoking worry you, mamma?”

“Always so thoughtful for me,” said the fond mother to herself. Then aloud—

“I don’t mind it, Cyril, but I don’t think your father——”

She stopped short, for the Rector interrupted her, sternly.

“Is an invalid lady’s room a suitable place for smoking pipes, Cyril?”

“Don’t see that it matters what the place is so long as the invalid don’t mind. But there, don’t make a bother about it,” he cried, tapping the burning tobacco out on to the hob; “I can wait until I go down again.”

“Shall we go down, papa?” said Julia, rising with Cynthia from where they sat in the window.

“No, my dears; you must hear what I am going to say, so you may as well hear it now.”

"Oh, no, Eli," moaned the invalid.

"Very well, my dears, you had better go," said the Rector, and he led his daughters to the door, which he opened and closed after them with quiet dignity.

"Row on!" muttered Cyril. "Well, ma, dear, how are you?"

"Not—not quite so well, Cyril," she said, fondly; and her voice trembled, as she dreaded a scene. "Will you come and sit down here by me?" she added, pointing to a chair.

"Yes, I may as well," he said, laughingly, "and you can take care of me, for I see somebody means mischief."

The Rector bit his lips, for his was a painful task. He wished to utter a severe reprimand, and to appeal to the young man's sense of right and wrong, while here at the outset was the mother bird spreading her protecting wing before her errant chick, and ready, the Rector saw, to stand up boldly in his defence.

“ Let me punch up your pillow for you, dear,” said Cyril, bending over the couch, and raising the slight frame of the sick woman, whose arms closed softly round the young man’s neck, while he beat and turned the soft down pillow, lowering the invalid gently back into her former place, and kissing her tenderly upon the brow.

“ That’s better,” he said. “ I hate a hot pillow, and it’s so comfortable when it’s turned.”

Mrs. Mallow clung fondly to her son for a few moments, smiling gratefully in his face ; and the Rector sighed and again bit his lip as he saw how moment by moment his task was growing more difficult.

“ If he would only study her feelings in the broader things of life,” he said to himself ; and he took a turn or two impatiently about the room.

“ Now, governor, I’m ready,” said Cyril, facing round suddenly, his mother holding his

hand between hers. "What's the last thing I've done amiss?"

"Heaven knows," cried the Rector, startling his wife by the way in which he suddenly flashed into anger. "The last thing that I have to complain of is that I cannot trust my own son."

"Ah, you mean with money, father," said the young man, lightly. "Well, it does go rather fast."

"I mean my son's word," said the Rector, quickly. "Cyril, last night you told me a lie."

"Oh, no, no, no," cried the mother, quickly. "It is some mistake, dear. Cyril would not tell you what was not true."

The Rector, after years of patience, was so thoroughly out of temper with the discovery of that day that he retorted hotly—

"A lie—I say he told me a deliberate lie."

"Nonsense!" said the young man. "People tell lies when they are afraid to tell the truth. I'm not afraid to tell you anything."

“You told me last night, sir, that you had been down in the town with Frank, whereas I find this morning that you had been at Kilby Farm.”

“Ha, ha, ha!” laughed Cyril. “Why, what a discovery, father. You asked me where I had been, and I told you—‘down the town.’ So I had. You did not ask me whether I had been anywhere else, or I might have added, to the Churchwarden’s.”

“And pray why did you go there, sir?” cried the Rector.

“Come, father, don’t talk to me as if I were a naughty little boy about to be sent to bed without his supper.”

“Pray be calm, dear,” cried Mrs. Mallow. “Cyril gives a very good explanation. Surely it was natural that he should walk over to Kilby.”

“I say why did you go over there, sir?”

“To smoke a pipe with old Portlock, if you must know, and have a glass of his home-

brewed ale. It's dull enough here with the girls."

"It is false, sir," cried the Rector, excitedly.

"Well," said Cyril, coolly, "you may not find it dull, but I do."

"I say, sir, it is false that you merely went there to drink and smoke."

"Very well, father," said Cyril, in the most nonchalant way, as he lay back in his chair and played with his mother's rings. "Perhaps you know, then, why I went."

"Oh, hush, Cyril, my boy," panted the invalid. "Eli, my dear, pray be calm. This hurts me—hurts me more than I can tell you."

"I am sorry, my dear, very sorry," cried the Rector, excitedly; "but it must be stopped. I cannot allow matters to go on as they do. It is terrible. I feel at every turn as if I were being disgraced. I shiver as I go down the town or make a call, for fear that I should have to encounter some fresh disgrace brought upon us by our own boys."

“What’s the matter with the governor, ma, dear?” said the young man, mockingly. “Has Frank been up to some fresh games?”

“Oh, hush, my dear boy,” cried the poor woman, imploringly.

“I’ll be as quiet as I can, dear,” replied Cyril; “but there are bounds to everything. I am not a child.”

“No, sir, but you act like one—like a disobedient child,” cried his father. “No matter what is done for you, back you come home to idle and lounge away your existence. The idea of the nobility of labour never seems to have dawned in your mind.”

“Never,” replied Cyril, calmly. “Nobility of labour, indeed! Why, father, what’s the good of quoting stuff like that to me out of one of your old sermons?”

“You are utterly wasting your life, sir.”

“Not I, father,” retorted Cyril. “I am rather enjoying it. Let those work who are obliged. Why should I make myself a slave?”

I like my existence very well as it is, and don't mean to bother."

"It is disgraceful," cried the Rector, whose usually bland face was now fierce with anger.

"Don't see it. I don't spend much, nor yet get into debt. You've got plenty of money, so why should I trouble myself about work?"

"I'd forgive that," cried the Rector—"I'd forgive your idleness, but when I find that you cannot be trusted, I am compelled to speak."

"But, my dear," remonstrated the invalid, "what has poor Cyril done? He did not like the wretched slavery out in the colony, and he could not content himself with the drudgery of a clerk's desk. Do not be so severe. Be patient, and he will succeed like Frank has done."

"What has he done?" cried the Rector. "What is he doing but leading such a life as must disgrace us all."

“ Nonsense, father !” cried the young man.

“ It is no nonsense, sir. Months ago I spoke to you about your conduct, but it has been in vain. People in all directions are noticing your behaviour towards Miss Portlock. Just, too, when your sisters are about to make excellent matches.”

“ Miss Portlock !” cried Mrs. Mallow, starting. “ Oh, Cyril !”

Cyril acted like an animal brought to bay. He began to fight. While there was a chance of his father not being aware of his proceedings, he fenced and parried. Now he spoke out sharply—

“ Well, what do people say about my behaviour with Miss Portlock ? She’s a very nice ladylike girl, well educated, and sweet and clever, and if I like to chat with her, I shall.”

“ Oh, Cyril !” cried his mother again ; and then she added, “ Is this true ?”

“ True ? Is what true ? That I have been

to Kilby sometimes to have a chat with Sage Portlock? Of course it is. Why not?"

"You own to it, then?" said his father.

"Own to it, if you like to call it so, sir. And now, pray, where is the harm?"

Mrs. Mallow withdrew her hand from her son's grasp, and looked in his face with a terribly pained expression, for, with all her gentleness of disposition, the sense of caste was in her very strongly; and with all his failings, she had looked upon Cyril as a noble representative of the mingled blood of the old family Mallows and the Heskeths from whom she sprang.

"I am to understand, then," said the Rector, "that you propose honouring us with a daughter chosen from the people here."

"I don't say yes, and I don't say no," replied Cyril, cavalierly. "I think I have heard you say often that Sage was a very nice girl."

"Sage?"

“Yes, Sage. I think you had the pleasure of baptizing her by her herbaceous name, so you ought to know.”

The Rector exchanged glances with his wife, whose face wore a very pitiable look.

“I have—yes—certainly—often said that Miss Portlock was a very good, sensible girl,” he said at last.

“Well, then, what more do you want, sir? I suppose you expect a man to think about such things at some time in his life?”

“But have you proposed for her hand?” said his mother, faintly.

“Proposed for her hand? Nonsense, mamma. People of their class don’t understand things in that light.”

This was a false move, and the Rector took advantage of the slip.

“People of that class, sir? Then you acknowledge that you are degrading yourself by these proceedings.”

“Oh, I don’t know about degrading myself,

sir. You know what they say. If a lady marries her groom she descends to his level. If a man marries his cook he raises her to his."

"But does Mr. Portlock — my Churchwarden—know of your intentions?"

"How can he," said Cyril, coolly, "when I have none?"

"But Mrs. Portlock believes that you are paying your attentions to her niece."

"Yes, I s'pose so," he replied. "Terribly silly woman."

"Oh, Cyril, Cyril," said his mother, "this is very, very shocking."

"Stuff and nonsense, mamma. Why, what a tremendous fuss about a little bit of flirtation with a pretty little schoolmistress. You nearly had her sister for a daughter-in-law when Frank was after her."

"Frank saw the folly of his proceedings, and grew sensible," said the Rector.

"Oh, did he!" muttered Cyril.

"The word flirtation, Cyril," said the Rector,

firmly, “is a disgrace to our civilization, and one that ought certainly to be heard from no decent lips.”

“Matter of opinion, of course,” said Cyril; and he placed his hands under his head and stared straight out of the window, while the Rector and his wife exchanged glances.

“Cyril,” said the former at last, after a struggle to keep down his anger, “I will not quarrel with you.”

“That’s right, governor. I hate quarrelling.”

“But while you are under my roof I must be obeyed.”

“Don’t think any man has a more obedient son,” replied Cyril.

“The time, however, has now come when some plan must be devised for you to make a fresh start in life upon your own account.”

“’Pon my word, father, I don’t see it. I’m very comfortable as I am.”

“But I am not, sir,” replied his father, firmly. “For years past it has been thrown

in my teeth that I am rightly named Eli. You know why. It is time, now, sir, that we took care not to be ashamed of the enemy in the gate."

"Please don't preach, father," said the young man, in a tone of protestation.

The Rector paid no attention to his words, but went on—

"Let me ask you first," he said, "one question."

"Go on," said the young man, for his father had stopped.

"Has Miss Portlock accepted your attentions?"

There was a pause here.

"I say, Cyril, has Miss Portlock accepted your attentions?"

"Matter of confidence," replied the young man. "Question I would rather not answer."

"Then she has not," said the Rector, quickly, "and I am very, very glad."

"Why, father?"

“ Because, as I have told you before, she is receiving the attentions of Mr. Luke Ross.”

“ Oh, nonsense !” cried Cyril, flushing.
“ That’s all off now.”

“ I heard something of the kind ; but what do you mean ? Have they quarrelled ? ”

“ Oh, no. Old Portlock wouldn’t have it : and quite right, too. Girl like that to be engaged to such a clod ! ”

“ Cyril,” said his father, angrily, “ I would to heaven that I had as good a son.”

“ Complimentary to your boys, sir. Let’s see, he threw you over very shabbily about the school, didn’t he ? ”

“ He declined the post, certainly.”

“ Then even Mr. Luke Ross is not perfect, sir.”

“ I am not going to criticize his conduct over that matter, sir, beyond saying that he had no doubt good reasons for declining the post. On further consideration I think he was right, for unless he felt his heart to be

in his work, he would have been wrong to venture upon binding himself to the school."

"Most worthy young man, I've no doubt," said Cyril, with a sneer.

"A young man for whom I entertain a great respect," retorted the Rector.

"One of those highly respectable young men who push their way on in the world," sneered Cyril.

"And often become great with the poorest of means for pushing their way," said the Rector, "while those well started miserably fail."

"Oh, yes ; I know 'em," said Cyril. "One reads of them in the nice books. Bah ! I haven't patience with the prigs ; and as for this Luke Ross," he cried, with the colour burning as two spots in his cheeks, "I look upon him as one of the most contemptible cads under the sun. You talk of wishing that you had such a son, father ! Why the fellow is utterly beneath our notice."

“ Why ? ” said his father, in a sharp, incisive tone.

“ Why ? ” replied Cyril. “ Because he is.”

“ A pitiful reply,” said the Rector, angrily. “ Can you give me a better reason for your dislike to Luke Ross ? ”

“ Not I. He is not worth it.”

“ Then I’ll give you one,” replied the Rector. “ The true one, Cyril, though it cuts me to the heart to have to speak so to my son, and before the mother who has worshipped him from his birth.”

“ Oh, Eli, pray, pray spare me this,” cried Mrs. Mallow, supplicatingly.

“ No,” he said, “ I have been silent too long—I have given way too much. It is time I spoke out with no uncertain sound. Cyril, you hate this man because he is your rival in the affections of a good, true girl. Your anger has taught me so far, and I rejoice thereat. Your suit has been without success. You teach me, too, that you would stop at

nothing, even blackening your rival's character, to gain your ends; but this must not be. I look upon Sage Portlock as in my charge, and I tell you, once and for all, that you must stop this disgraceful pursuit. I say that it shall not go on."

"And how will you stop it, sir?" cried Cyril, springing to his feet, while the mother lay back with clasped hands.

"I don't know yet, but stop it I will," cried Mr. Mallow. "You shall disgrace your mother and sisters no longer—insult Miss Portlock no more by your pursuit."

"Insult her?"

"Yes, sir, insult her. She is too good and pure-hearted a girl for her affections to be tampered with by such a heartless fellow as you."

"Eli, Eli," moaned Mrs. Mallow, but her cry was unnoticed by the angry men.

"Tampered with! Heartless! Bah! You do not know what you are saying."

“I know, my son, that the time has come for me to strike. You must leave here, and at once. Sage Portlock is not for you. If you do not know your position in life and your duty to your class, you must be taught.”

“Then hear me now,” cried the young man, defiantly. “Luke Ross is no rival of mine, for he has never won Sage Portlock’s heart. That belongs to me; and as to duty, caste, and the like, let them go to the devil. Have her I will, in spite of you all, and——”

“Silence, sir!” cried the Rector, beside himself with passion—the rage kept down for years; and he caught his son by the throat. “Man grown—no, you are a boy—a child, whom I ought to soundly thrash for your disobedience and shame. Son? you are no son of mine.”

“Loose me, father,” cried the young man. “I will not bear this. Loose me, I tell you, or——”

Father and son had forgotten themselves, and in those brief moments of their struggle a strange blindness had come over them. They swayed to and fro, a little table covered with china was upset with a crash, and, at last, getting one hand free, Cyril clenched his fist and struck out fiercely, just as a wild and piercing scream rang through the room.

CHAPTER XXV.

WHERE CYRIL WENT.

MRS. MALLOW'S cry of horror as, after struggling for the first time for many years into an upright posture, she fell back, fainting, had the effect of bringing father and son back to their senses. Another second and Cyril's clenched hand would have struck down the author of his birth; but at that cry his arm fell to his side, and he stood there trembling with excitement as the Rector quitted his hold, and flung himself upon his knees by the couch.

He rose again on the instant to obtain water and the pungent salts which were close at hand, striving with all the skill born of so many years' attendance in a sick room to restore the stricken woman to her senses.

Frank had already left the house, but the cry brought Julia and Cynthia into the room.

“Oh, mamma, mamma!” wailed Julia, and she too busied herself in trying to revive the stricken woman.

Not so Cynthia, who took in the situation at a glance, and burst into a passion of sobs, which she checked directly, and with flushed face and flashing eyes she crossed to her brother.

“This is your doing,” she cried; “you will kill mamma before you’ve done; and Harry might have been here and heard all this. Cyril, I hate you; you’re as wicked as Frank;” and to her brother’s utter astonishment she struck him sharply in the face.

“Little fool!” he growled fiercely, as he caught her by the wrist, but only to fling her off with a contemptuous laugh. He made no motion to help, but stood with frowning brow and bitter vindictive eye watching his parents alternately; but though he went to and fro

many times, and passed close to his son, the Rector never once looked at him, seeming quite to ignore his presence there.

Constant efforts had their due effect at last, for the unhappy mother uttered a low wailing cry, and then, as her senses returned and she realized her position, she began to sob bitterly, clinging to her husband as he knelt by her, bending his face down upon her hands as he held them tightly in his own.

From where Cyril stood he could see his father's face, that it was deadly pale, and that his lips were moving rapidly as if in prayer, and thus all stayed for some little time, till the laboured sobbing of the invalid died off into an occasional catching sigh.

At last she unclosed her eyes, to fix them appealingly upon her son, her lips moving, though no audible words followed; but the look of appeal and the direction of her pathetically expressive eyes told her wishes as she glanced from Cyril to the carpet beside her

couch—told plainly enough her wishes, and the young man read them aright—that he should come there and kneel down at his father's side.

“Not I,” he muttered. “The old mad-man! How dare he raise his hand to me like that!”

He thrust his hands in his pockets and remained there with a look mingled of contempt and pity upon his face as he watched the prostrate figure of his father, while, as his mother's appealing eyes were directed to him again and again, he merely replied to the dumbly-uttered prayer by an impatient shake of the head.

At last the Rector raised his eyes, and as he met his wife's agonized look, he smiled gently, and then bent over her and kissed her brow.

“It is passed, my love,” he whispered. “God forgive me. I did not think I could have sunk so low.”

Julia passed her arm round her sister, and

drew her to the window, to lay her head upon her shoulder and weep silently and long.

“Cyril,” said the Rector, in a broken voice, as he rose and stood before his son, “you have tried me hard, but I have done wrong. My temper gained the better of me, and I have been praying for strength to keep us both from such a terrible scene again. Come down with me to the study, and let us talk of the future like sentient men. God forgive me, my boy ; I must have been mad.”

He held out his trembling hands, and Cyril saw that he was evidently labouring under great emotion, as he absolutely humiliated himself before his son, his every look seeming to ask the young man’s forgiveness for that which was past. But Cyril’s anger was, if not hotter, more lasting than his father’s, and rejecting the offer of peace between them, he swung round upon his heels and strode out of the room.

For a few minutes there was absolute silence,

as mother and father gazed at the door through which the son had passed. Then, with a piteous sob, Mrs. Mallow exclaimed—

“Oh, Eli, Eli, what have we done?”

“Commenced the reaping of the crop of weeds that are springing up in our sons’ neglected soil. Laura, I have tried to be a good father to our boys, but my weakness seems to stare me now in the face. I have been fond and indulgent, and now, Heaven help me, I have been weaker than ever in trying to amend the past by an outbreak of foolish violence.”

“Go to him; ask him to come back,” sobbed the mother.

“Did I not humble myself to him enough?” said the Rector, with a pathetic look at his wife.

“Yes, yes, you did,” she wailed; “but this is all so dreadful. Eli, it will break my heart.”

“And yet I ought to be strong and stern now, sweet wife,” he said tenderly. “Authority

has long been thrown to the winds. Had I not better strive hard to gather up the reins and curb his headlong course?"

"It will break my heart," the unhappy woman sobbed. "It is so dreadful—so horrible to me, love. Eli, husband—my patient, loving husband, bring him back to me or I shall die."

"I will fetch him back, Laura," said the Rector, softly, as he bent down once more and kissed the cold, white forehead of his wife.

Then, rising with a sigh, he softly moved towards the door, turning once to smile at the troubled face he left behind.

As he turned, the suffering woman held out her arms, and he walked back quietly to sink upon his knees by her side.

"Pray," she said, softly. "Pray for help and guidance in this storm." And once more there was silence in the room.

"He is our boy," whispered Mrs. Mallow, as the Rector rose. "Be patient with him, Eli, and all will yet be well. Indeed, indeed,

he is good and true of heart. See how tenderly he waits on me."

"Just for a minute, now and then," the Rector thought; "and only when it does not clash with some selfish object of his own." And then he fell to thinking of his own years upon years of constant watchfulness and care, and smiled sadly as he saw how that at times the little far outshone the great.

But nothing in his countenance betokened aught but the tenderest sympathy and love for her he was leaving behind, as, once more going to the door, the Rector passed through, and descended to his study, leaving Mrs. Mallow weeping in her daughters' arms.

Here he shut himself in for a few minutes, and rapidly paced the floor, holding his hands the while to his rugged brow.

"It is too much—it is too much!" he groaned, panting with the great emotion to which his soul was prey. "If it was not for my girls! If it was not for my girls!"

Then he threw himself into his chair, and sat leaning forward with his fingers seeming to be driven into the soft padding of the arms, which he clutched with fierce vehemence.

But by degrees the gust of passion passed over, leaving him calm and cool as, once more rising, he smoothed his countenance, and went out of the room in search of Cyril.

He was not in the dining-room, nor yet in the little room where he was in the habit of sitting to read and smoke, while the state of the garden was not such as to induce him to wander there.

The Rector went up softly to his son's room, but without finding him ; and at last he went into the dining-room and rang the bell.

“Where is Mr. Cyril ?” the Rector asked.

“He went out about half-an-hour ago, sir.”

“With Mr. Frank ?”

“No, sir ; Mr. Frank went out before that.”

“Did he say what time he would be back ?”

“No, sir ; but Williams came in just now,

sir, with Lord Artingale's mare for Miss Cynthia."

"Yes?"

"And said he met Mr. Cyril in the lane leading to Kilby Farm."

"Indeed!"

"Yes, sir; and he was walking up and down as if he expected somebody to come."

CHAPTER XXVI.

AN INTERRUPTION..

FROM the way in which people talk of the tender passion it might be supposed to be one long dream of bliss ; but a little examination of other people's hearts, and the teachings of the knowledge thus obtained with the experience of years, will go far to show that it is as often as not very far from being a dream, being, in fact, a time of misery, disappointment, and oftentimes of despair.

The earlier days of Sage Portlock's maidenhood had glided peacefully away. She had had her troubles and annoyances like the rest of the world, but they were little, and barely ruffled the even current of her life.

She had been troubled somewhat over her sister's love affair with Frank Mallow, and had been Rue's confidante. Now that stormy time had passed away, and she had smiled over the wedding with John Berry, and laughingly accepted her position of Aunt Sage to the two little children that were born.

Luke Ross had been her playmate till a tenderer attachment had sprung up as girlhood passed into womanhood, and the boy became a thoughtful man. There was a thrill of pride ready to run through her, making the colour suffuse her cheeks, as she knew that she was loved; and with the thought came a proud elation that made her feel happier than she believed she had ever felt before.

But that was all. She loved Luke, she told herself, very dearly, and some day she would be his wife; but she felt happy enough when he went away to London, and somehow, though she used to consider that she was the

happiest of women, his calm, trusting letters did not seem to awaken any echoes in her heart; while hers to him were pleasant little bits of gossiping prattle, ending with "the dear love of yours very, very affectionately, Sage."

Yes, she was very fond of Luke, she used to say to herself, and by and by they would be so happy together; but she felt in no hurry for by and by to come. Existence was very pleasant as it was, and once she was back in Lawford from the training institution and engaged in the school, she seemed to wish for nothing more.

Luke Ross wrote, and twice during his absence there he came home, and they had very pleasant walks and chats, and were very boy-and-girlish together, laughing away till a serious fit would come on, when they discussed the future, the cost of housekeeping, and she laughed merrily again at the idea of being Luke's little housekeeper and wife.

But there was no passionate attachment on her side—no tears at meeting or at parting. All was wonderfully matter-of-fact. She was very happy, she felt, and she could see that Luke was, and what more could she desire ?

Then came the change, and Sage was face to face with the fact that she had promised herself to a man for whom she had never entertained a warmer feeling than that of friendship, or the love of a sister for brother, and that at last she had found her fate.

Was it a feeling of rapturous delight ?

Far from it ; for from that day her nights were sleepless, and too often her pillow was wet with the hot tears of her misery and distress.

On the day of the serious quarrel between father and son Sage was in better spirits than she had been in for some days. A letter had come from Luke telling her of his progress in London ; of his father's willingness to make him a sufficient allowance for the object he

had in view, a matter which had been settled since he came up, and that he had taken what his landlord called "chambers" in a legal part of town.

So light-hearted was Sage that day that she laughed over Luke's merry description of his chambers as being so many square feet of emptiness, with a cupboard in which he had to sleep.

He gave her a very graphic account of the way in which he had furnished his rooms, of how he walked into Fleet-street every day to have a chop for his dinner, and how the woman who made his bed prepared his breakfast and tea, and then followed a sentence which made Sage laugh merrily — a laugh that was repeated several times during school hours, to the great astonishment of the girls.

"And it is wonderful what a very little while half-a-pound of tea seems to last."

That was the sentence which amused her,

and for a time Cyril Mallow passed from her thoughts.

“What a little time it lasts!” she said merrily, as soon as the school had been dismissed, and she was putting on her hat. “Poor boy! of course, he knows nothing at all about housekeeping; and only to think,” she mused, “how dreadful it must be to go on living every day upon chops.”

She started for home, thinking a great deal of Luke, and telling herself that the fancies that had of late come into her head were as foolish as they were wicked, and that now they were dismissed for ever.

What would Mr. Mallow himself think of her? What would Mrs. Mallow say? She shivered, and felt that unless she sternly determined never to think of Cyril again, she could not meet the Rector, who had always been so kind and fatherly in his ways.

This had been a nasty dream—a day-dream that had come over her, fostered by Cyril

. Mallow's looks and ways. For he had followed her about a great deal; watched for her so that they might meet, and had constantly been coming up to the farm of an evening, where, though ostensibly chatting with her uncle, she could not raise her eyes without encountering his.

She could not have explained it to herself, but somehow Cyril Mallow had seemed to influence her life, being, as it were, the very embodiment of sin silently tempting her to break faith with Luke Ross, and think only of him who had come between.

She told herself constantly, when the thoughts of Cyril Mallow intruded themselves, that she loved Luke better than ever, and that the coming of Cyril was hateful to her; but, all the same, there was a strange light in her eyes whenever she thought of him, and her cheeks would burn and her pulses flutter.

It was a strange way of hating, but she

told herself that it was hate, and on this particular day the coming of Luke's letter had seemed to strengthen her, and she began planning what she would say in return ; how she would give him good advice about his housekeeping, say words of encouragement to him about his studies, and praise his determination. For was he not striving with all his might ; had he not determined upon this long struggle for position that he might win her ?

And how could she do anything but love him ? Dear Luke ! Indeed she would be true to him, and write him such encouraging letters—help him all she could. It was her duty now, for though they were not regularly affianced with her friends' sanction, she told herself that her promise to him was sacred.

“ Yes,” she said, half aloud, as she walked thoughtfully on, “ I love Luke very dearly, and that other was all a bad, feverish kind of dream, and I'll never think about it more. It was wicked of Mr. Cyril, knowing what he

does, and weak of me, and never again——
Oh !”

“Did I make you jump, Sage ?” said a low voice ; and Cyril came from the gate over which he had been leaning, and jerked the stump of a cigar away.

“I—I did not see you, Mr. Cyril,” she said, faintly, and the tears sprang to her eyes.

“And I frightened the poor little thing, did I ? There, I’ll be more careful next time ; but, oh, what a while you have been.”

“Don’t stop me, Mr. Cyril,” she said, with trembling voice ; “I must hurry home.”

“Well, you shall directly ; but, Sage, don’t please be so hard and cruel to me. You know how humble and patient I have been, and yet you seem to be one day warm, the next day cold, and the third day hot and angry with me. What have I done ?”

“I do not understand you, Mr. Cyril,” she said, trying to speak sternly, and walking on towards the farm.

“Then I will speak more plainly,” he said, suddenly dropping the bantering tone in which he had addressed her for one full of impassioned meaning. “Sage, I love you with all my heart, and when you treat me with such cruel coldness, it makes me half mad, and I say to you as I say now, what have I done?”

“Oh, hush! hush!” she panted. “You must not speak to me like that. Mr. Cyril, I beg—I implore you—never to address me again. You know—you must know—that I am engaged to Mr. Ross.”

“Engaged to Mr. Ross!” he said, bitterly. “It is not true. There is no engagement between you.”

“It is true,” she panted, hurrying on, and trembling for her weakness, as she felt how strongly her heart was pleading for him who kept pace with her, and twice had laid his hand, as if to stop her, upon her arm.

“I have your aunt’s assurance that it is

not true," he continued; "and I have hoped, Sage, I have dared to believe, that you were not really fond of this man."

"Mr. Cyril, I beg—I implore you to leave me," she cried.

"If I left you now," he said, hoarsely, "feeling what I feel, knowing what I know, it would be to plunge into some miserable, reckless course that might end who can say how? What have I to live for if you refuse me your love?"

"How can you be so cruel to me?" she cried, angrily. "You insult me by these words, Mr. Cyril. I am alone, and you take advantage of my position. You know I am engaged to Mr. Ross."

"I do not," he retorted, passionately. "I do not believe it; and I never will believe it till I see you his wife. His wife!" he continued. "It is absurd. You will never be Luke Ross's wife. It is impossible."

"I will not—I cannot—talk to you," she

cried, increasing her pace. It was on her lips to add, "I dare not"; but she checked herself in time, as she glanced sidewise at him, for with a feeling of misery and despair, strangely mingled with pleasure, she felt that all her good resolutions were being swept away by her companion's words, and, in an agony of shame and dread lest he should read her thoughts, she once more hurried her steps.

"You cannot throw me off like that," he said, bitterly. "I will not be pitched over in this contemptuous manner. Only the other day you looked kindly and tenderly at me."

"Oh no, no, no," she cried, "it is not true."

"It is true enough," he said, sadly, "and I mean to be patient. I cannot believe you care for this man. It is impossible, and I shall wait."

"No, no, Mr. Cyril," she pleaded. "I can never listen to such words again. Think of your father and your mother. Mr. Mallow

would never forgive me if he knew I had listened to you like this."

"Let him remain unforgiving, then," cried Cyril. "As for my mother, she loves her son too well not to be ready to do anything to make him happy."

"Pray, pray go," she moaned.

"No," he said, sternly, "I will not go. You torture me by your coldness, knowing what you do. Do you wish to drive me to despair?"

"I wish you to go and forget me," she cried, with spirit. "As a gentleman, Mr. Cyril, I ask you, is such a course as this manly?"

He was silent for a few moments, glancing at her sidewise the while.

"No," he said, "it is neither manly nor gentlemanly, but what can you expect from a miserable wretch against whom all the world seems to turn? Always unsuccessful—always hoping against hope, fighting against

fate, I find, now I come home, that the little girl I always thought of when far away has blossomed into a beautiful woman. How, I know not, but I wake to the fact that she has made me love her—idolize her—think of her as the very essence of my being.”

“Mr. Cyril,” pleaded Sage ; but he kept on.

“A new life appears to open out to me, and my old recklessness and misery seem to drop away. I waken to the fact that there is something to live for—something to rouse me to new effort, and to work for as an earnest man should work. I did not seek her out ; I did not strive to love her,” he continued, as if speaking to some one else ; “but her love seemed to come to me, to enweave itself with my every thought.”

“I will not listen,” panted Sage, but her heart whispered, “Luke never spoke to me like that.”

“I fought against it for a time,” he went on, dreamily, “for I said to myself this would

be wronging her. She is engaged to another, and I should only make her unhappy and disturb the even tenor of her ways."

"Which you have done," she cried, in piteous tones.

"Do not blame me," he said, softly. "I fought hard. I swore I would not think of you, and I crushed down what I told myself was my mad love within my breast; but when, by accident, I found that I was wrong, and that no engagement existed between you and Luke Ross——"

"But there is, there is," she cried. "Once more, Mr. Cyril, pray leave me."

"A few mere words of form, Sage. You do not love this man; and, besides, your relatives have not given their consent. Oh, listen to me. Why should you condemn me to a life of reckless misery? You know how I have been drifting for years without an anchor to stay me. You are that anchor now. Let me cling to you for my father's,

my mother's sake ; for if you cast me off, continue this cruel wrong, you drive me once more from home, to go floating aimlessly, without a chance of becoming a better man. You cannot be so harsh."

"I cannot listen to you," she murmured.

"I tell you," he cried, "that if you cast me off you condemn me to a life of misery and despair. Sage, dear Sage," he cried, catching her hand, "I have been wild and foolish, but I have the making in me of a better man. Help me to live aright. You are so good, and pure, and sweet—so wise and gentle. Be my guide and helpmate, and those at home will bless you. Am I always to plead in vain?"

"How can I look Luke Ross in the eyes again if I listen to such words as these?"

"Luke Ross? Am I to stand idly by and let Luke Ross, the cold, careless cynic, snatch you from my arms?"

"How dare you speak of him like that?"

she cried, angrily. "He is all that is wise and good."

"And worships you so dearly that he has gone away for three years, at least, to prove to you his love."

"It is a great act of noble forbearance," she said, proudly, "and you slander him by your words."

"I hope I do," he said; "but they were wrung from me by my misery and suffering. But no, I will not believe you can be so cruel to me. I know that I may hope."

They were nearing the gate leading into the great home field, and Sage, trembling and agitated to a terrible degree, hurried on, feeling that, once within sight of the house, Cyril Mallow would leave her. Her mind was confused, and the struggle going on between duty and inclination was terrible; while the knowledge that she was so weak and yielding towards her companion half maddened her for the time.

"Why do you hurry on so?" he pleaded. "Am I to be driven away? Am I to leave home, and go anywhere that fate may drift me?"

"Oh, no, no, no," she moaned. "This is too cruel to me. Pray, pray leave me now."

"Then I may hope?"

"No," she cried, with a fresh accession of strength, as she laid her hand upon the gate; "I have promised to be Luke Ross's wife."

"His you shall never be," he said, in a hoarse whisper. "You do not love him, and you shall not fling yourself away. Sage, you shall be mine, and——"

"Well, young man, are you obliged to whisper what you say to my niece? Come, Sage, my girl, it's time you were indoors."

"Uncle!" cried Sage, joyously, as she sprang to his side with a sigh of relief.

"Yes, my girl," he said, coldly, "it is uncle;" and he stuck his thistle staff down

into the soft earth, and leaned his hands upon the round top. "You can go on," he continued; "I'm not coming home yet."

"But, uncle," she cried, excitedly.

"Go home, my lass," he said, imperatively.

"Yes, dear," she half sobbed; "but you will not——"

"I say go home!" he shouted; and, with a low wail, she turned off, and walked hurriedly towards the farm, her uncle standing watching her, while Cyril Mallow coolly took a cigar-case from his breast pocket, opened it, carefully selected a cigar, picking, choosing, and returning one after the other till he had found one to his fancy, when he snapped to the case once more and thrust it back in his pocket, afterwards biting off the cigar-end and proceeding to light it with a fusee that evinced a strong dislike to burst into sparks and then smoulder away.

As he did this, however, he kept glancing furtively at the Churchwarden, who was

watching the retiring form of Sage, her troubled mien winning a glance or two from Cyril as well.

The cigar burned badly, and had to be lit again, this time being watched by the Churchwarden with a kind of good-humoured contempt for the man who could smoke those rolls of tobacco-leaf in place of an honest pipe.

At last the cigar drew freely, and the eyes of the two men met.

"I'm in for another row now," said Cyril, to himself. "Awkward; very. Never mind; I don't care."

"Now, young man," said Portlock, at last, in a very short, blunt fashion, "it seems to me that you and I had better have a few words together of a sort."

"When and where you please," said Cyril, carelessly.

"Let's walk along here, then," said the Churchwarden, pointing down the lane with his thistle staff.

“ Away from the farm, eh ? ” thought Cyril. “ All right, old friend. ” Then aloud, “ Which-ever way you please, sir. ”

“ I didn’t know things had gone so far as this, ” continued the Churchwarden, leading the way. “ People say that you are the idlest chap in these parts ; but it seems to me that, with the work thou likest, thou canst be as busy as the best. ”

Cyril flushed a little, and bit his lip, for he told himself that he was a gentleman, and the farmer was making far too free in his way of address ; but he checked his annoyance, and said quietly—

“ Perhaps, sir, you will kindly explain what you mean. ” Then, after a furtive glance at the stern, angry-looking man, he muttered to himself—

“ You dare not strike me ; and, as to your words, say what you like—little Sage is mine. ”

“ Now, sir, ” exclaimed Sage’s uncle, after

a few moments' pause, "will you have the goodness to explain the meaning of the scene I have just witnessed?"

"Explain, sir?" said Cyril, coolly; "surely it needs no explanation. I am young, and of one sex; Miss Portlock is young and of the other sex, and a mutual attachment has sprung up."

"Mutual!"

"Well, yes; I hope so, sir. Perhaps, though, I ought to be content with alluding to my own feelings."

"Humph! Your own feelings, eh? And pray does Mr. Cyril Mallow mean to say that he has become attached to my niece?"

"Certainly he does, sir. You are not surprised?"

"But I am surprised," said the farmer, angrily, "and I am very glad to have witnessed what I did before the mischief went further. Now, look here, Mr. Cyril Mallow, I am a man of business, and when I have an

unpleasant matter to tackle I go straight to it at once."

"A very good plan," said Cyril, calmly.

"I'm glad you think so, sir," said the Churchwarden, ironically. "And now, if you please, we'll walk straight up to the rectory."

"What for?" cried Cyril, who was startled by his words.

"What for? Why to talk this matter over with your father."

"But suppose he does not approve of the engagement, Mr. Portlock?" said Cyril, who was taken somewhat aback by this very prompt way of treating the affair.

"Approve? Whoever thought he would approve, sir? Of course he does not, any more than I do. What I want is for you to be given to understand in a quiet way that it is time you gave up visiting at my place, and hanging about to catch sight of my little girl, when she is leaving or going to the school."

“Mr. Portlock!” exclaimed Cyril, haughtily.

“Mr. Cyril Mallow!” cried the Churchwarden. “Now just look here, sir. If I were one of your set, should you be making approaches to my niece in the way you have? Not you: it would not be considered proper. Aunt’s and uncle’s consent would be asked first; but as I’m only a farmer, I’m hardly worth notice. It seems that my little lassie has taken your fancy, and so you come running after her; but not a word to me.”

“But hear me a minute,” protested Cyril.

“No, sir; nor yet half a minute. A farmer’s a man, if he is not what you call a gentleman, and thinks as much of his people as the highest in the land. I dare say, in your high and mighty way, as our rector’s son, and a gentleman who has been at college, you think you are stooping to notice my niece; so let me tell you, once for all, I don’t think you are; and, what’s more, it will be a far better man than

you have shown yourself to be who gets my consent to make her his wife."

"I can assure you, Mr. Portlock——" began Cyril; but the farmer would not hear him. He was thoroughly angry, and his face flushed up a deep red.

"And I can assure you, sir, that I want no such reckless, idling fellow seeking after my niece. We had bother enough when your brother was after Sage's sister. I tell you, then, plainly, once for all, that I won't have it; so don't show your face at my place again."

He turned sharply round and strode off, leaving Cyril mortified and angry; for, in his way, he had felt that he was stooping, and falling away from his position, in noticing the little schoolmistress, so that this sharp rebuff came like a rude shock to his feelings, and made the end at which he aimed seem less likely to be achieved.

"Confound his insolence!" he cried, as he

saw the broad back of the farmer disappearing through his own gate. "It is too bad to be borne."

But in a few minutes' time, as he walked slowly homeward, he began to smile and think over his position.

"Let him talk and speak loud," he said. "I thought he was going to threaten me once. What does it matter? My father is dead against it, and he and Master Portlock will make common cause against me. But what does it matter when Aunt Portlock is on my side, and little Sage is as good as won? Then, as to madame, my poor mother? Pish! she will refuse me nothing. So, Master Churchwarden, I have three women on my side, and the game is mine, do what you like."

He walked on a little way, amusing himself the while by thinking of the divided sides, and how much stronger his must be.

"Let them fight us," he said, laughing.

“We shall be four to two, and we must win ; but stay, I had forgotten another enemy —Master Luke Ross. Poor fellow !” he said, contemptuously, “his chance against me is about the value of *nil*.’

CHAPTER XXVII.

AFTER A PIPE.

MRS. PORTLOCK was in the great kitchen of the farm as Sage hurried through, and she stared with astonishment at the girl's excited way.

“Why, heyday! Sage——” she began.

“Don't stop me, aunt,” cried Sage, excitedly; and, running up-stairs, she shut herself in the room, threw herself upon her knees by her bed, and covered her face with her hands, sobbing as if her heart would break.

“She's been having a quarrel with him,” said Mrs. Portlock to herself, “or she wouldn't take on like that. They must be getting on then, or they wouldn't quarrel.”

Mrs. Portlock paused here to go and scold one of the maids for picking out all the big lumps of coal and leaving the small, but she came back into the kitchen to think about her niece.

“He’s a deal better than Luke Ross,” she said to herself, “for Luke’s only a tradesman after all. There’s no mistake about it, he means our Sage ; and where, I should like to know, would he find a better girl ?”

There was a pause here, during which Mrs. Portlock indulged in a few retrospects concerning Rue, and the time when she was in such trouble about Frank.

“But Cyril is a better disposed young man than his brother, I am sure,” she said, half aloud. “He is his mother’s favourite too. I wonder what Mrs. Mallow will say !”

Mrs. Portlock said this aloud, and then stopped short, alarmed at her own words, for she called up the face of the calm, dignified Rector entering the place, looking at her

reproachfully, and ready to blame her for her assumption in encouraging his son's visits.

"Oh, my gracious!" she ejaculated, half in horror, for her imagination for the time began to run riot, and she saw that, even if Cyril Mallow was very fond of Sage, and even if Sage returned his love, matters would not run quite so smoothly as she had anticipated.

"I'm sure she's as good as he," she exclaimed, by way of indignant protest to the accusations of her conscience; but, all the same, she was now brought face to face with the consequences of her tacit encouragement of Cyril Mallow's visits.

"And I'm sure we're as well off as they are," she added, after a pause. But, all the same, her conscience would not be quieted, and Mrs. Portlock was on the point of going up to her niece's room, when, with a fresh qualm of dread, though she hardly knew why, she saw her husband come striding up toward the house.

Meanwhile Sage's breast was racked by conflicting emotions, chief amongst which was that suggested by a self-accusation from her wounded heart ; and she knelt there, sobbing and praying for help, feeling that she was intensely wicked, and that the hopeless misery of her case was greater than she could bear.

Her mind was in a chaos, and she shuddered as she clung to the coverlet, and dragged it over her drawn and excited face, as one moment it was the stern, reproachful figure of Luke Ross asking her if this was her faith—this the meaning of her tender, loving letters—this the reward of his chivalrous determination to give up everything to the one idea of making himself a worthy suitor with her relatives ; the next it was Cyril, gazing at her with despairing eyes, which seemed to say that if she cast him off he should drift recklessly through the world, and come to some bad end ; while, did she bless him with her love, he would become a worthy member

of society, a happy man, and one of whom she could feel so proud.

Then her heart began to plead for him so hard that she trembled, for she seemed to be awakening, as it were, into a new life, and her dread increased as she more fully realized the power Cyril Mallow had gained over her. She fought hard, and set up barrier after barrier, called up by her intense desire to be honourable and true to her trust. But as fast as she set these up they seemed to be swept away; and, as the excitement brought on by her misery increased, she felt ready to cry aloud to Luke to come back to her and protect her from Cyril Mallow and from her own weak self.

“Sage! Sage!”

It was her uncle's voice calling up the stairs—a voice by which she could interpret every mood of his spirit; and she knew now that he was very angry.

“Sage!” came again in a voice of thunder,

and so full of impatience that she was forced to cross to the door, open it, and answer.

“I want my tea,” came up in an angry roar.

It was in Sage’s heart to say she was too unwell to come down, but in her then agitated state she could only falter that she would not be a minute, and, hastily bathing her eyes and smoothing her hair, she descended, pale and trembling, to where her aunt was looking very white and startled, and her uncle walking up and down the old-fashioned parlour, impatient for his evening meal, one of which he would rarely partake unless his niece was there to attend to his wants.

The Churchwarden’s lips parted, and he was about to speak out angrily, but the woe-begone looks of the girl silenced him.

“I’ll have a cup of tea first, and do it over a pipe,” he said to himself. Then aloud—

“Come, my girl, I’m hungry ; it’s past tea-time,” and he took his place at the foot of the

table, the others seating themselves, after exchanging a scared glance; and then the meal went on much as usual, only that Mrs. Portlock tried to calm herself by constant applications to the teapot, while, in spite of her efforts, Sage could hardly partake of a morsel, for the food seemed as if it would choke her.

“Come, come, lass, you don’t eat,” her uncle kept saying; and the poor girl’s struggles to keep back her tears were pitiable.

But at last the weary meal came to an end, and as the table was cleared both aunt and niece grew hopeful, for the Churchwarden’s brow was less rugged as he went to the ledge where his pipe lay, took the tobacco-box placed at his elbow by his niece, and calmly proceeded to fill his pipe.

“Don’t look so frightened, Sage,” whispered her aunt. “He won’t say any more now.”

“Yes, I shall,” cried the farmer gruffly, for his hearing seemed to have become preter-

naturally sharpened. "Wait till the room's clear."

The troubles of that one afternoon seemed to have wrought quite a change in Sage, for as, according to her custom, she took a folded spill from the mantelshelf, and lit it ready to hold to her uncle's pipe, her eyes looked wild and dilated, while her usually rounded cheeks seemed quite hollowed, giving her a wild, haggard aspect, such as is seen in one newly risen from a bed of sickness.

"Yes, I'm going to talk seriously to both of you," continued the Churchwarden; "but I'm not going into a passion, now. That's over. Get your work, both of you, and sit down."

The trembling women obeyed, after exchanging quick glances; Mrs. Portlock's being accompanied by a movement of her lips, which Sage interpreted to be "I can't help it."

The work-baskets were brought to the table, and as the Churchwarden sat placidly smoking

and staring at the fire, the sharp *twit* of needle against thimble was heard in the stillness, which was not otherwise broken till the farmer took his pipe from his lips and uttered a stern—

“Now then.”

Sage started quickly back from where her thoughts had wandered after Cyril Mallow, whom in imagination she had just overtaken and brought back from a wandering life, to bless him and make him happy, while Luke Ross had forgiven her, and every one was going to be happy once again.

“Hold your tongue, mother,” said the farmer, sharply. “I’ve given you a bit of my mind.”

“Indeed, you have,” she cried, querulously, “and, I must say, soon——”

“No, you mustn’t,” he shouted. “I’m going to talk this time. You generally do all that; but it’s my turn now.”

“Oh, just as you like, Joseph,” said Mrs.

Portlock, in an ill-used, protesting tone ; “but I must say——”

“No, you mustn’t,” he cried again, bringing his hand down heavily upon the table with such an effect upon his wife, whose nerves were still shaken by the verbal castigation she had received before tea, that she started from her chair, hesitated a moment, and then ran sobbing out of the room.

For a moment the Churchwarden sat frowning. Then he half rose as if to call her back, but directly after he subsided into his place, and sat frowning sternly at his niece.

“Let her go,” he said. “I’ve said my mind to her. Now I want to talk to you.”

Sage hesitated, with her work in her hand ; then, letting it fall, she went to the other side of the table and knelt down, resting her elbows upon her uncle’s knees, and gazing appealingly in his face.

The Churchwarden in his heart wanted to clasp her in his arms and kiss her pale, drawn

face, but he checked the desire, and, putting on a judicial expression—

“Now,” he exclaimed. “So you are playing fast and loose with Luke Ross?”

“No, uncle,” she replied, softly.

“What do you call it, then? Of course there is no engagement between you, but Luke expects that some day you will be his wife.”

“Yes, uncle.”

“And as soon as his back is turned, I find you encouraging this fellow, Cyril Mallow.”

“No, indeed, uncle, I have not,” cried Sage.

“I don’t be——”

He stopped, for there was something in his niece’s eyes which checked him.

“Well, it looks very bad,” he said; “and one thing is very evident—he, after a fashion, thinks of you, and he has the impudence to say that you care for him.”

“Oh!”

It was more like a sigh than an ejaculation,

and Sage's eyes seemed to contract now with pain.

"I've given aunt a good talking to, for she's more to blame than you. She thinks it a fine thing for the parson's boy to be coming hanging about here after you, same as Frank did after Rue, and much good came of it. She had the impudence to tell me that he was a gentleman, while Luke Ross was only a tradesman's son. As if that had anything to do with it. 'Look here,' I said to her: 'whenever our girl weds, it shall be to some one with a good income, but he shall be a man.' Gentleman, indeed! If Cyril Mallow is a gentleman, let my niece marry a man who is nothing of the sort."

Sage's eyes closed, and there was a pitiful, pained expression in her face that told of the agony of her heart. So troubled was her countenance that her uncle was moved to pity, and spoke more tenderly.

"I don't like him well enough for you, my

girl, even if there were no Luke Ross in the way. I've sent him off to work for thee, like Jacob did for Rachel, and if he's the man I think him, some day he'll come back in good feather, ready to ask thee to be his wife, and you'll neither of you be the worse for a few years' wait."

Sage's eyes remained closed.

"I was going to scold thee," he said, tenderly, "but my anger's gone, and I'll say but little more, only tell me this—You don't care a bit for this young spark of the Rector's."

Sage's face contracted more and more, and the Churchwarden cried, impatiently—

"Well, girl, why don't you answer?"

She gazed up in his face with a pleading expression of countenance that startled him, and he placed his hands upon her shoulders, and looked fully in her eyes.

"Why, Sage!" he cried, "you don't mean—you don't say that you like him instead of Luke?"

She covered her face with her hands, and burst out into a violent fit of sobbing.

"I don't know, uncle. I don't know."

"Don't know!" he cried, angrily.

"Pray ask me no more," she cried, as her uncle started from his seat, thrusting back the chair in the act. She crouched down upon the carpet, weeping bitterly, for she did know now, though no pressure would have torn the secret from her heart.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

JOCK MUSES.

THERE was a troubled heart at the rectory as well as at the farm, where Julia Mallow, in spite of having been so far a firm, matter-of-fact girl, had found her meetings with the wheelwright's big ruffianly brother make so strong an impression that although she made a brave effort to cast it all aside as unworthy of her, she was always living under the idea that this man was at her elbow, ready to meet her with his intent, half-mocking gaze.

Once or twice she had nervously alluded to it when chatting with her sister, but Cynthia had merrily told her not to be so silly, for

papa said the man must have just come out of prison, and spoken like that out of spite.

“Depend upon it, Julie, you’ll never see him again.”

Julia said nothing, but went to the window of her room, and sat there reading, and now and then lifting her eyes to gaze out at the pleasant prospect right across the fields to the ridge about a quarter of a mile away, beyond which the land sank at once towards Kilby Farm.

The next moment with a faint cry she shrank back, for even at that distance she seemed to recognize the burly form of the rough fellow, seen boldly standing out against the sky as he appeared to be crossing the ridge. Then as she gazed at the figure with starting eyes it went over the edge of the hill and was gone.

“I shall never dare to go out alone,” she said hoarsely. “Heaven help me! What shall I do?”

This was quite a couple of months after the meeting in the lane, during all which time the poor girl felt as if she were haunted by the fellow's presence, and his words were always ringing in her ears.

The time had slipped away, and company had come and gone. The Perry-Mortons had been down for a second visit, ostensibly for discussions with the Rector concerning the decorations of the town house, but Cynthia read it—and told Lord Artingale her reading—that it was to worm round poor Julia, and that was what papa meant. Didn't he think it was a shame?

Lord Artingale agreed with her that it was, and between them they decided in alliance to do all they could to prevent it; but unfortunately for Julia, this pair of egotists thought of little else but themselves—thoughts that were varied by a little squabbling when Cynthia showed what a peppery temper she possessed.

Julia was looking languidly forward to the middle of May, when the town house was to be ready, and in busy London she felt that she should be free from the haunting presence which afflicted her so sorely that she even felt glad of Mr. Perry-Morton's poetical rhapsodies as a kind of protection, though there was something terrible in his presence. In fact, this gentleman showed his admiration in a way that was painful in the extreme. He said little, but he loved her with his eyes, and when Mr. Perry-Morton loved he did it in a sculpturesque manner, sitting or standing in some wonderful position, at a short distance, and then gloating—no, a Philistine would have gloated—he, one of the chosen of the Raphaelistic brotherhood, dreamed over his beloved, mentally writing fleshly poems the while—wondrous visions of rapt joyousness, mingled with ethereal admiration.

But it wanted a month yet to the time for leaving the rectory, and though Julia had not

seen her horror again, she felt that he was near, and that at some unexpected moment he would start up, perhaps when she was alone.

Matters there as regarded Cyril were in abeyance. He was, as he told himself, playing a waiting game. Sage would have a nice bit of money, he knew, and he thought it would be a pity to spoil his prospects by hurried play.

Besides, he was in no hurry, for he had the companionship of Frank, and together they went a great deal to the King's Head, where there was an old billiard-table. At other times they drove over to Gatley, where Lord Artingale placed everything he possessed at their service. There was a good billiard-table there, horses, and wine, and cigars to their hearts' content.

Then each had a little private business to attend to, about which they made no confidences, and rarely interfered with or joked each other, it being a tacit arrangement that

no questions should be asked if Frank was going over to Lewby for a chat with John Berry, or Cyril had made up his mind for a stroll down by the wheelwright's, where there were a few dace to be whipped for in the stream.

Spring had come earlier that year, and while Luke Ross thought the Temple gardens and the trees in Gray's Inn poor dejected-looking affairs, down by Lawford everything was looking its best, for Spring's children were hard at work striving to hide the rusty traces of the wintry storms.

Early in April the banks and the edges of the woods were alive with flowers, glossy-leaved celandines showed their golden stars, brightly-varnished arums peered up with their purple-spotted spathes and leaves, the early purple orchids brightened the dark-green here and there. Clusters of soft pale lilac cuckoo-flowers were springing up amongst the clumps of catkin-laden hazels, oak saplings with bark

like oxidized silver, and osiers with orange stems and polished silver buds, while every bank and coppice was sprinkled with sulphur yellow where the primroses bloomed. There was mating and marrying going on in feather-land to the blackbird's fluting, and the twittering of many throats, and one soft, warm day, when the east wind had been driven back by a balmy breathing from the west and south, Cynthia made a dash at her sister, and laughingly passed the string of her hat over her head, thrust a basket in her hand, and led her off to gather violets.

"Let's be little children once again, Julie," she cried. "I want a rest. It has been nothing but spooning, and nonsense lately with Cyril and the pretty schoolmistress."

"Papa has been in sad trouble about it lately, Cynthia," said Julia, thoughtfully.

"Yes, but let's hope it is all over now; I think it is."

"I don't know," said Julia, thoughtfully.

"I think I do," cried Cynthia. "Papa frightened him. But how wonderfully quiet our dear brother Frank is. I hope he is not hatching some mischief."

"Don't be uncharitable, Cynthia," said Julia, with a sad smile; "think the best of your brothers."

"I do try to, Julie, but I'm afraid I'm not very fond of my brothers."

"Cynthia!"

"Well, I'm not, dear. I feel quite ashamed of them sometimes. It's quite shocking the way they are imposing upon Harry, and he takes it all so good-naturedly for my sake, but he don't like it I'm sure."

"You are making the worst of it, Cynthy."

"No, I'm not, for Harry—there, I won't talk about it; I'm tired of all the nonsense, spooning and flirting with Harry and that fat-featured—oh! why is it rude for a young lady to slap such a fellow's face, Julie? If you marry that Perry-Morton I'll never speak to you again."

"I shall never marry Mr. Perry-Morton," said Julia, dreamily.

"No, no ; we don't want to marry any one at all," said Cynthia, merrily. "Come and let's be children in the wood again. It's heavenly out of doors, dear. Come along."

Heavenly it was, as they got out of the fields, and struck out through the woods, where the soft moss was like a carpet beneath their feet, and the air was redolent with scents and suggestions of the spring. For it was one of those days, of those very few days, that come early in the year, when the senses seem to be appealed to, and, in a delicious calm, the worries and cares of life roll away, and the spirit seems even troubled with the sweet sense of joy.

The sisters had wandered far, and filled their baskets, but still there were always fresh blossoms to pluck, odorous violets or primroses, and delicate scraps of moss or early leaf.

Cynthia was a couple of score yards away

from her sister, in the budding copse, trilling a merry song, as if in answer to the birds, and Julia, with a bright, happy flush upon her face, was still eagerly piling up fresh sweets, when a clump of primroses, fairer than any she had yet gathered, drew her a few yards further amongst the hazel stems.

She was in the act of stooping down to pick them when her flushed face became like marble, her lips parted, her eyes dilated, and she stopped—leaning forward—motionless—fascinated by what she saw.

And that was the face of Jock Morrison, as he lay amongst the leaves and flowers, prone upon his chest, his arms folded before him, his chin resting upon them, and his eyes literally seizing hers, not a yard away.

He did not speak or move, only crouched there, staring at her as if he were some philosopher trying the effect of the stronger eye upon the weaker. Neither did Julia speak, but stood there bending down, her eyes fixed,

her body motionless, while you might have counted twenty.

“Julie! Where are you? Coo-ee!”

Cynthia's bright young voice broke the spell, and Julia's eyes closed as she backed slowly away for a few yards before she dare turn and run towards her sister.

“Oh, there you are, Julie. If I did not think you were in the other direction! Why, what's the matter? Are you ill?”

“No, no,” said Julia, hastily; “I think I am hot; it is tiring out here. Let us go home; I—I want to get back.”

“Why, Julie, you don't come out enough; you are done up directly. There, come along out into the fields, there's more fresh air there. I say, did I tell you that we are to go to town next week?”

“No,” said Julia, who shivered at every sound in the copse, and glanced from side to side, as if she expected to be seized at any moment.

“But we are, and I don’t know but what I long to be up in London to get away from Harry Artingale.”

“To get away?” said Julia, making an effort to be composed, and wondering why she had not told her sister what she had seen.

“Yes, I want to get away; for of course,” she added, archly, “he will have to stay down here.”

She spoke loudly, and all that had been said and left unsaid appealed very strongly to the senses of the great fellow in the copse.

Julia need not have felt afraid that he was about to rise up and seize her; he remained perfectly still for a few moments, and then rolled over upon his back, laughing heartily, but in a perfectly silent manner, before having a struggle with himself to drag a short pipe and a tobacco-pouch out of his pocket.

Filling his pipe quietly, he struck a match and lit it, placed his hands beneath his head, and stared straight up through the tender green

leaves at the bare sky, while a robin came and perched upon a branch close by, and kept watching the ruffian with his great round eyes.

"This is jolly," he said, in a bass growl; "better than having places of your own, and being obliged to work."

Then he smoked for a few minutes before musing once more aloud.

"Women arn't much account," he said, oracularly; "and the younger and prettier they are, the worse they are."

There was another interval of smoking.

"What a deal a fellow sees by just doing nothing but hang around. Franky Mallow, eh? Ah, he cuts me now. If I was John Berry, farmer, I'd cut him, that's what I'd do."

Another interval of smoking.

"Why don't young Serrol" (so he pronounced it) "go after the schoolmissus now, I wonder? Tired, I s'pose."

Another smoking interval.

“Hah, if it’s acause he prefers going down to the ford——”

He stopped short.

“I tell you what it is ; if I thought——”

Another pause, during which Jock Morrison made his short pipe still shorter by biting off a piece of the stem and spitting it out.

“Shall I tell Tom—shan’t I tell Tom ? Tom don’t like me, and tells me to keep myself to myself. He’d about smash him, that’s what Tom would do, if he knowed, and then he’d be miserable for ever and ever, amen, as owd Sammy Warmoth used to say.”

Another smoking fit.

“She’s a good little lass, and the trouble she was in about her bairn was terrible.”

More smoking, and the robin looking wondering on.

“Polly don’t like me, but she’s a kind-hearted little lass, and has give me many a hunk of bread and meat unknown to Tom, and I never see but that she was as square as square.”

Another long smoke.

"Master Serrol, eh? Why, of course! She must ha' knowed him when she lived at parson's. I'll tell Tom."

More smoking, and the pipe of tobacco burned out.

"No, I won't tell Tom," said the big fellow. "If I did he wouldn't believe me, and it would only make him and Polly miserable too, and I don't want to do that. I tell you what—if I see Master Serrol go down there again when Tom's out of the way I'll pretty well break his neck."

He uttered a low chuckling laugh as he lay prone there, catching sight now of the robin, and chirruping to it as it watched him from its perch.

"Pretty Dick!" he said. "Going up to London, are they? All right! Anywheres 'll do for me, parson. I wonder whether Serrol and Frank 'll go too."

Jock Morrison did not pretty well break

Cyril's neck, for a very few days after Mr. Paulby had the full management of Lawford Church again, the family at the rectory being once more in town.

"It is worse for the boys," said the Rector, "but it will keep Cyril away from her. I must get him something to do."

CHAPTER XXIX.

MR. AND THE MISSES PERRY-MORTON

“AT HOME.”

It was a lovely and sculpturesque attitude, that which was taken up by the “stained-glass virgins,” as James Magnus called them, on the night of their first “at home” of the season, for at every opportunity, when not otherwise engaged, they joined their hands together, raised them over their left or right shoulder, as the case may be, and then drooped a head against them till an ear just touched the finger-tips, so that they seemed to be saying their prayers all on one side and writhing over the *Amens*.

Claudine and Faustine Perry-Morton were

thorough types of the ladies who have of late taught society how to indulge in the reverent worship of the human form. Their hair was too fearful and wonderful to be described. The nearest approach possible is to compare it to the gum mop of some Papuan belle, who had been chivied during her toilet in the eucalyptus shade, and, consequently, had only managed to get the front part done.

Since dress is made so great a feature in a modern lady's life, no excuse is surely needed for saying a few words regarding the costume of these gifted sisters. A desire is felt to do justice to those robes, but to give a perfect idea would be extremely difficult.

As it happened, the colour was but one, and it was that of the familiar household tap-rooted vegetable botanically named *daucus*, but hight the carrot, when seen reposing in sweetness in a dish.

These dresses were, of course, ingeniously contrived to keep on the persons they enfolded,

but their aspect was as if a length of many yards of this ruddy orange saffron material had been taken, and one end fastened to an ivory shoulder with a tin-tack of enormous size, the other end being held under the foot of some one far away. Parenthetically, let it be remembered that this is all surmise, as no doubt the costumes were built by one of the highest authorities in fashionable garb. But to resume.

The ends of the dress being thus secured upon the shoulder and beneath a distant foot, it seemed that the lady must then have commenced a slow movement, revolving gently and winding herself in the web till it formed a regular—or rather, irregular—spiral bandage from shoulder to ankle, leaving the long thin arms bare, and, after being secured at the feet, trailing far behind and spreading out like a fan.

Perry-Morton walked to the fireplace, laid his head sideways against a large blue plate, which gave him the appearance of a well-fed

saint with an azure halo, closed his eyes like a vicious critic on varnishing day, and uttered a low sigh full of rapture, after which he seemed to bless his sisters for giving him a sensation that was perfectly new.

Of the decorations of that suite of rooms it is needless to speak. Every visitor said they were perfect. Even James Magnus told Lord Artin-gale they were not half bad, "only there's too much suggestion of the kitchen-dresser with the dinner-plates ranged all a-row."

Harry Artingale thought it a polished pantechicon-inferno till the Mallows were announced, and then it seemed transformed into a paradise of delight, where every one walked on air, and the sweet essence of pretty little Cynthia pervaded all.

For Mr. Perry-Morton and the Misses Perry-Morton were "at home," and the big butler was pretty well occupied in announcing the names called to him by the footman, who stood down among the azaleas with which the hall

was half filled, ready to open the door and rearrange the roll of horsehair matting which would keep getting out of place.

Lord Artingale and his artist friend arrived early, Magnus to be button-holed and taken aside to see his picture hung with a gaslight and reflector before it, to show it to the best advantage ; and yet he was not grateful, for when he returned to Harry Artingale he growled, as the latter, who was very light-hearted and happy, said, "like a sore tom"—cat, of course, understood.

Perry-Morton was standing with his blue china halo behind his head, and with a fleshly poetic look in his eye ; and his sisters were each posed before a big Benares brown dish, etherealizing her lambent curls and pallid face into virgin and martyr beauty, when the butler announced the Mallows, the girls looking very natural and charming, and Frank and Cyril creating quite a sensation with their sunburnt, swarthy faces and rugged bearing.

"Oh, Claudine," whispered Faustine, "look at Julia," and her sister uttered a tragic "Ah!" as she advanced with her brother to receive the new arrivals.

Certainly Julia looked deadly pale, for as she descended from the carriage she had caught sight of a great burly fellow bearing a lantern, which he ostentatiously held low, so that her little pale blue satin rosetted shoes should not go astray from the carpeted path, and the sight of his dark eyes had sent the blood rushing to her heart. But this pallor rather added to than took from her beauty, as, simply dressed in the palest of pale blue satin, and her throat and arms wreathed with lustrous pearls, she seemed to stand alone amidst the throng of strangely grotesque costumes by which she was surrounded.

The sisters changed their key instanter upon seeing the effect produced upon their brother, whose eyes half closed once more as he greeted his guests. In fact, he treated the

Rector with such deference, that for a moment it seemed as if he were going to sink upon his knees, and in true patriarchal style ask for his blessing.

But he did not, neither did he raise Julia's hand to his lips. He merely beamed upon her rapturously, led her to a seat after the congratulations of his sisters had had due course, and then, as a kind of hum went through the rooms, proceeded to hover over his choice.

"A melody in heaven's own azure," whispered Perry-Morton. "Julia, your costume is perfection."

The pallor on poor Julia's cheeks had been giving place to a vivid blush, but her host's words and manner once more drove the blood to her heart, and she sank back upon the lounge, glad to use her fan, for she thoroughly realized that she was looked upon by all present as the future mistress of the place.

"Magnus, my dear boy," whispered Artin-gale, "have you any charity in your nature?"

"Heaps. Why?"

"Because I want you to go and cut that fellow out. Julia really is a nice girl."

"Don't be a fool," was the answer, given with such intensity that Artingale was startled.

"Fool, be hanged! I'm in earnest. Wait a bit, and we'll go up to her together, and then I'll be off and leave you. You'd stand no end of a chance, for Cynthia likes you ever so."

"Don't be an ass, Harry," said Magnus, "you seem to be happy enough. Let the poor little body be."

"Well, I don't want to quarrel," said Artin-gale, "but if ever a fellow was a fool or an ass I should think it would be when he turned up his nose at the chance of winning a little woman who has not been spoiled by the world."

"Oh, she's nice enough," said Magnus, gruffly. "Are those two brothers going to marry those stained-glass virgins?" he continued, as Cyril joined Frank, who was bending impressively towards Faustine.

"I wish to heaven they would," said Artingale, earnestly. "Hang the brothers! What a thing it is that pretty girls are obliged to have brothers! At last!—I'm off. There's the telegram."

The message came along a beam of light, and that little bright beam stretched from Cynthia Mallow's eye to that of the speaker; and the message was,—

"You dear stupid old goose, why don't you come?"

For Artingale had held rather aloof until the fair young hostesses had withdrawn.

"Why didn't you come before, sir?" said the lady, looking very severely at her swain.

"I was afraid," he said.

"What, of me, sir?"

"No, no," he whispered, "I've been longing to get near you, but I dared not. Oh, my little darling, how beautiful you look to-night."

"For shame, Harry; now look here, sir, I

will not permit you to be so familiar. The idea of addressing me in such a strain."

"There," he sighed, "now you are getting on stilts again, and we were so happy down at Lawford."

"Yes, but that's country, and this is town. We are in society now, sir, and we must be very proper."

"There, my beautiful little tyrant," he whispered, "I am your slave. I won't rebel; only reward me sometimes for my patience with a kindly look."

"Well, if you are very good, perhaps I will," said Cynthia. "But you did not tell me, Harry, why you were afraid. Ah, that's right, that tall thin ghost is going to sing, so we can talk."

In effect, a very cadaverous-looking lady, with an exceedingly startled air, was led by Mr. Perry-Morton to the piano, and after he had screwed his eyes up, glanced round the room, and held up a white finger to command

silence, the thin lady, who evidently purposely lived upon an unwholesome regimen, to keep herself graceful, fixed her eyes upon one particular piece of blue china near the corner of the room, and began to sing.

“Now, sir,” whispered Cynthia, “you must not speak loud. Tell me quietly.”

“May I sit down?”

“If that is enough room for you, sir. Now go on.”

Artingale would have thought the edge of a knife room enough, so that he could be near Cynthia, so he sat down in a very uncomfortable position, and received such a merry, mischievous look that he sighed with content.

“The fact is—oh, murder!”

“Hush, Harry! What is the matter?”

“Would it look rude if I were to cork my ears with glove-fingers, Cynthia?”

“Of course, sir! For shame! You have no soul for music.”

“Not a bit,” he whispered; “only when

you warble one of those little ballads of yours, I shut my eyes and wish you were a brook."

"Wish I were a what, you foolish boy?" whispered Cynthia, looking up at the great *boy* who towered over her.

"A brook, my darling, to go on for ever," he whispered back so earnestly, that Cynthia felt a little thrill of pleasure run through her, and her pretty face became slightly suffused.

"Now you are talking nonsense again," she said. "Oh, I do wish that dreadful romance would end. Harry, if you speak to me again like that, I shall send you away. Now, sir, why were you frightened? Did I look so fierce and majestic?"

"No: only more beautiful than ever."

"Harry!"

"Fact. Well, I'll tell you: Claudine Perry-Morton was by you."

"Well, what of that, sir?"

"And I felt as if I dared not come near in case of an accident."

“An accident, Harry! What, to the gas? Oh fie! what a silly old joke; you mean her hair would set it alight.”

“No, I don’t; I don’t mind red hair. After yours, it’s the prettiest there is.”

“Don’t stoop to compliments, sir. Now tell me why you were afraid of an accident?”

“Why I feel sure that some time or other she’ll come undone. Look at her dress. I wouldn’t be there for the world.”

“Harry!”

There was a very genuine blush as she looked at him reproachfully; but her face softened directly as he whispered in such a low, earnest tone that it thrilled her once more—

“Forgive me, darling, it was too bad, I know; there, we won’t talk about ourselves, I only want to be near you. Let me take you down to supper.”

“Would you like to?”

“Yes.”

"Very much?"

"Darling!"

What wonderful emphasis an engaged couple can put into their words. Evidently that last noun uttered by the young fellow opened out a vista of future bliss to Cynthia, who answered him with a look which was a perfect bond in its way, engrossed in parchment, sealed, signed, witnessed, endorsed, and tied with dark green silk in proper legal style.

"I haven't been to dear Julie yet," he said.

"What a shame! Go at once, sir."

"No, no; don't send me away at present."

"Well, you must go presently, Harry," she said, softly; "I'm so glad you are fond of Julie."

"Bless her! I love her very much," he said.

"She's the dearest, sweetest, sisterly little body I ever met. I always feel as if I should like to kiss her when I shake hands, and her pretty little lips seem to look up to one so naturally. Cynthia, darling, I often wished I

had a sister, and—and now I'm to have one, am I not ? ”

“ I don't know—perhaps,” she said, looking down.

“ I told Magnus one day I wished I had a sister for his sake. Thank goodness the song's done. Let's clap our hands, for joy.”

They clapped their hands, as did every one else, but of course not for joy.

“ I like Mr. Magnus,” said Cynthia, thoughtfully.

“ He's the best and truest-hearted fellow in the world,” cried Artingale, enthusiastically.

“ And if you had had a sister, what then, sir ? ”

“ I should have made old Magnus marry her.”

“ Indeed, my lord bashaw ! And suppose the lady did not approve ? ”

“ But she would approve. No really sensible girl would refuse Magnus, if she came to thoroughly know him.”

There was silence here, during which a very pale gentleman with a very large aquiline nose, which seemed to be his feature, the rest of his face merely representing base or pedestal, threw his long black hair behind his ears, and recited a portion of one of Rosetti's poems.

"Harry," said Cynthia then, "go and see Julie now."

"Must I?"

"Please. Poor girl, she is so unhappy ; I'm in great trouble about her."

"Poor darling !" he replied.

"You know I told you about our being out in the woods collecting flowers?"

"Yes."

"And how Julia came upon that great fellow lying amongst the moss and primroses?"

"Yes ; I wish I had been there !" and the young man's teeth gave a grit together. "But he did not say anything to her?"

"No ; only stared in a way that frightened her horribly, and it seemed to have such an

effect upon her when she dragged herself away, that she was quite ill, and it was hours before I found out what it was."

"Poor child! But she must not think about it. She may never see him again."

"But she keeps seeing him, so she says. He seems to haunt her. She saw him in the park again a few days ago."

"But did she see him, or was it fancy?"

"Oh, no, it was not fancy; I saw him too. A great big leering fellow."

"Oh, but it must be stopped; your brothers and I must thrash him."

"And I half think she saw, or fancied she saw, him to-night, for she was so bright and cheerful when we started, and when we came in she seemed to have turned to stone."

"Well, poor child, she will soon have a manly protector now," he said, rather bitterly, as he glanced at where Perry-Morton was hovering over Julia, while the Rector stood by smiling rigid approval.

"Don't talk like that, Harry," said Cynthia, quietly ; "you hurt me."

"Forgive me," he whispered, "but it makes me mad to see your people ready to sell her to that man."

"Papa thinks it right, and for the best. And it is not selling, Harry, for papa is rich."

"But surely Julia cannot care for him?"

"She does not say so, but she loathes him, Harry."

"Then why in the name of common sense does she not strike against it, or fall in love with some trump of a fellow who would stick up for her and take her part?"

"I wish she would, Harry. But, there, go to her now. She is miserable. Go and stay with her. Send Mr. Magnus to talk to me. No, take him with you, and let him chat to her about his pictures. Here is Mr. Perry-Morton coming to beam on me, Harry."

"Yes."

"Don't you feel jealous?"

"Horribly," he said, with a look that contradicted his word; and getting up, he went to where James Magnus was talking to a brother artist about their host's last purchase, an early specimen of Burne Jones, full of wonderful realistic trees, and a group of figures, who were evidently all in pain.

"Here," he whispered, catching him by the sleeve, "I want to take you to a lady."

"No, no—nonsense. I don't like ladies, Harry."

"Don't be stupid. I want you to come and chat with Julia Mallow, and take her down to supper. Why, what's the matter with you?"

"Nothing, nothing at all. There—no. Get some one else."

"Come along, old man. Cynthia sent me. And I say, talk about your pictures to her. Poor girl, she's miserable. They are trying to hook her on to Perry-Morton."

"Why, of course. People say they are engaged."

"And I say she isn't. She hates the fellow. Why, Magnus, old fellow, why not?"

"Why not what?"

"Oh, nothing. Come along."

The artist, after a moment's further hesitation, allowed himself to be led off, and the rest of that evening passed very pleasantly to Julia, who listened eagerly to the quiet, grave conversation of Lord Artingale's friend.

Like all evenings, this memorable one came to a close, amidst the shouting of linkmen, for the carriage of Mr. this, and my Lord that, and the clattering of uneasy horses' feet on the paving fronting the poet's home.

At last the cry arose—

"Mr. Mallow's carriage stops the way;" and the voice of a footman, like that of an archangel of fashion, came from inside the magnificent hall, where he stood amidst the flowers, with a deep-voiced "Coming down."

There was a little craning forward of the heads of the two rows of servants and idlers

running from the kerb right up into the great hall, forming a moving human wall on each side of the striped Edgington canopy put up for the occasion. The two policemen mildly suggested something about keeping back, but the big burly fellow with a lantern stood his ground, as he had stood it ever since the party had arrived.

The carriage steps were rattled down, the host came delicately tripping like a fat faun in evening costume, and handed Cynthia in, Lord Artingale being apparently quite content. Frank and Cyril were by the door waiting for a cab, there being some talk of calling at a club.

"Why didn't Artingale bring down Julia?" said Frank, scowling at James Magnus. "Perry-Morton ought to have handed her down."

"Oh, it's all right," said Cyril, whose face was flushed with champagne. "Come along."

The brothers were moving off, but they

stayed ; for just then, as Artingale's friend was handing Julia in, softening his voice involuntarily as he bade her good night, an importunate linkman thrust himself forward, ostensibly to hold his lantern to make the carriage steps plainer, and to keep the ladies' dresses from the wheels.

James Magnus saw it, quick as was the act in the semi-darkness, for as Julia was on the last step a great muscular hand grasped her soft white arm.

She turned sharply, and then uttered a cry of dread as she saw a brown bearded face close to hers.

It was the work almost of a moment ; then she sank back in her place in the carriage ; the Rector followed ; the steps had been rattled up, the door closed, the footman shouted "Home," and the horses sprang forward, hiding from the frightened girl the struggle taking place in the little crowd, as James Magnus seized the great ruffian by the throat.

CHAPTER XXX.

A LITTLE NARRATIVE.

“REALLY, Cynthia, it is not a pleasant thing to talk to you about.”

“I insist upon knowing all, sir. Please tell me, Harry.”

“That first order would have been obeyed, Cynthia ; but that last appeal makes me try to tell you with all my heart.”

“Now, Harry, once for all, I won't have it,” said the little maiden, holding up a tiny white warning finger, which, as they were alone in the drawing-room, Lord Artingale seized and kissed. “I want you to be straightforward and sensible when you talk to me, sir, and if

you do really like me, don't pay me silly, sickly compliments."

"I'll never pay you another, Cynthy, as long as I live," he said, eagerly ; and the light-hearted girl burst into a merry fit of laughter.

"Oh, Harry, what a dear, stupid old boy you are. There, now, that will do—well, only one more. Now be serious, and tell me, for really I am in very, very great trouble."

"But would you like me to tell you all about it?"

"Every word, Harry," said Cynthia, with a quiet, earnest look, as she laid her little white hand in his.

For, saving an occasional rebuff by teasing, Lord Artingale's love affairs seemed to be progressing in the most unromantic fashion. Cynthia had made a very pretty little confession to him ; the Rector had been appealed to, and had become for the moment a little less rigid ; and Mrs. Mallow had sighed and then smiled.

“Well, dear. No: let me hold your hand like that, I can talk so much better.”

“Oh, you foolish boy!”

It was very foolish, no doubt; but Cynthia let her hand rest where it was.

“Well, it was like this,” said Artingale. “James Magnus saw that great fellow with the lantern take hold of Julie’s arm.”

“Then you see now, sir, that it is not fancy.”

“Not much fancy about it, certainly,” said the young man, grimly, “unless it’s P.R. fancy.”

“P.R. fancy, Harry; what’s that?”

“Oh, nothing,” he replied, hastily. “It’s a term they give to fighting. Well, Magnus says he felt as if he could have killed the scoundrel.”

“That’s well,” said Cynthia, flushing scarlet, and with her eyes sparkling; “I like that.”

“Do you?”

“Oh, yes,” she whispered, nestling up to her companion, and letting him draw her

nearer, till her shiny little head rested against his breast.

"Yes, Harry, I like it—it sounds so brave and manly of him. Harry, dear, can't you make James Magnus fall in love with Julie?"

"No."

"You can't!"

"No, Cynthia. Shall I tell you a secret?"

"I thought there were to be no secrets between us, Harry," said the maiden, archly.

"Of course not. Well, little one, I think—no, I'm almost sure—that he has fallen in love with her already, without any making."

"Oh, Harry, dear, how delightful. Here, I must go and tell her."

"Not for the world, darling."

"And pray why not, sir?"

"Because, Cynthia," he said, raising her little face so that he could gaze seriously into her bright eyes, "because, dear, I should feel as if I had been betraying the confidence of my best friend."

“But I should tell her, not you, Harry.”

“Is there any difference?” he said, quietly.

“Isn't it all one now, Cynthy?”

There was a slight pause, during which Cynthia's eyes drooped beneath the searching gaze. Then she raised them, and returned his look with one so frank and full of loving trust that the young man's heart gave one great throb, and the silence seemed likely to be lasting.

“Did James Magnus tell you he loved Julie, Harry?”

“No; but I feel sure he does.”

“I'm so glad, Harry,” said Cynthia, softly; “so very, very glad. But now tell me all. I saw a sort of scuffle, and then we were out of sight, with poor Julie in a dead faint.”

“There isn't much to tell you, Cynthy, only that Magnus seized the scoundrel by the throat as the carriage dashed off; then there was a moment's struggle, and the fellow threw him by some clever wrestling dodge, and he fell

with his bare head a most awful crash upon the kerbstone."

"Oh!"

"That made me feel mad, and I went at the fellow, but he was off like a shot, dashed down the road through the gateway; and as I ran after him, followed by a lot of people and two policemen, I saw him cross the road, go right at the park railings, and he was over in a moment, and right into the shrubs."

"And did you follow?" said Cynthia, excitedly.

"Didn't I! But I couldn't get over so quickly as he did, and when I dropped on the other side I was half hanging by one of the tails of my coat, for a spike had gone through it."

"Oh, what fun," laughed Cynthia; "how droll you must have looked."

"I dare say I did," he said, good-humouredly; "but it gave the rascal time to get a good start, and when I was free and ran on

with the police and two more men, the scoundrel had gone goodness knows where."

"And you did not catch him, then?"

"No, he had got clean away, Cynthy, and after we had been hunting for above an hour we had to give it up."

"Oh, what a pity."

"Yes, wasn't it."

"I don't know, though," said Cynthia, softly; "if you had caught him he might have hurt you, too, Harry."

"I'll give him leave to," said Artingale, "if I can only manage to make my mark upon him."

"Oh, Harry, don't look like that; you frighten me."

"Do I?—there; but don't you be alarmed about me, little one, I can take care of myself, and I don't mean to rest till I've paid that fellow my debt."

"Paid your debt, Harry?" said Cynthia, with a look of alarm.

"Yes, little one ; I owe him something for frightening you, too, down at Lawford !—if it is the same man," he added.

"Oh, yes, Harry ; I saw his face last night quite plainly," cried Cynthia, excitedly.

"Then he has frightened little sister twice since. I say, Cynthy, I may call her little sister now ? "

"Of course you may ; but go on with what you are saying. Oh, Harry, dear," she whispered, "I wish I was as big and brave as you."

"And," he whispered, "I wish that you were always just as you are now, so sweet and bright and loving."

"Well, sir, go on."

"That's about all," he said, "only that I owe my fine fellow for last night's affair as well."

"And about Mr. Magnus ? "

"Well, I went back, of course, to Sunflower Oil-soap."

“Went where?” cried Cynthia, in astonishment. “Oh, I see, you had made your hands dirty getting over the railings.”

“No, no,” said Artingale, laughing, “I mean I went back to Perry-Morton’s.”

“Oh, what a shame, to call him such a name,” said Cynthia, solemnly, but with her eyes sparkling with delight.

“And there was poor Magnus lying on the sofa in the dining-room, and a couple of doctors bandaging his head, after which he insisted upon being taken back to his chambers, and——that’s about all.”

“But you’ve been to see him this morning, Harry?”

“I sat up with him all night, and he grew quite delirious, and talked a good deal about Julia.”

“Oh!” and a pause. “And is his hurt very bad, Harry?” said Cynthia, looking now rather white. “Will it kill him?”

“Oh, no,” said Artingale, “he was a good

deal hurt, and lost a lot of blood, and—oh, what an idiot I am !”

“No, no, Harry. I’m not so silly. I’m not going to faint. Hush, here’s Julia.”

For just then the door opened, and, looking very pale and wistful, the elder sister came into the room—smiling, though, as her eyes lit on the young couple ; and as Artingale jumped up to greet her, there was something very loving and sisterly in the way in which she gazed in his face, and let him lead her to the couch upon which they had been sitting.

Here she inquired very anxiously after Mr. Magnus, showing that she knew a good deal about the previous night’s affair ; but Artin-gale noted her shudder and look of horror when her assailant was mentioned.

“That fellow must be stopped,” said the young man, as he went thoughtfully away. “Poor girl ! she seems thoroughly afraid of him. Oh, hang it all, it must—it shall be stopped, or he’ll drive the poor child mad.”

CHAPTER XXXI.

IN THE DEN.

YOU had to pass through James Magnus's studio to get to his sitting-room, and through the latter to get to his bed-room, and the task was not an easy one. Lord Artingale knew his way by heart, but a stranger would have been puzzled from the moment he entered the lobby or hall. For the place resembled a Wardour-street old curiosity shop more than the abode of a well-known artist. A woman with the bump of order thoroughly developed would, if she had been placed in charge, have immediately invested in a dozen dusters, a turk's-head, and a feather brush, and gone to the attack, but only to sink down in utter despair.

Chaos seemed to have come back again at the abode of James Magnus, and modern nature and art to have joined hands to cover the aforesaid' chaos with dust. For there was dust everywhere ; thick, black, sooty dust of that peculiar kind that affects Fitzroy-square. It was never removed, save when a picture, chair, or " property " was taken from one part of the place to another, and the dust thus set floating, floated and settled upon something else. Certainly there was some kind of order in the sitting and bed-room, where the artist's man attended, but it was mostly disorder.

" I hate having my things moved," said Magnus. " When I set to work, I like to be able to begin at once, and not have to hunt for everything I want."

" I think the place is just perfect," said Harry Artingale. " One can get plenty of tidiness everywhere else, Jemmy, and I like coming to the den to be a beast."

So to make matters more comfortable

Artingale, at first out of fun, later on from habit, used to carefully place all his cigar ashes and ends wherever he could find a ledge—on the chimney-pieces, on the tops of up-turned canvases, on the inner parts of their frames, and balance soda-water and beer or hock corks upon the properties.

You entered the lobby or hall to be confronted by dusty busts and casts, and you went thence into the studio to be confronted by more dusty busts and casts. There were life-sized plaster figures of plenty of well-known antiques mixed up with a heterogeneous collection of artistic odds and ends. There were canvases new and old, with charcoal drawings, sketches, and half-finished paintings, costumes of all kinds, savage weapons, arms and armour, easels from the simplest to the most modern with its screws, and racks and reflectors, and tubes for gas. Rich pieces of carpet partially covered the floor. On one side stood a large raised dais for sitters, and

for non-sitters who wished to sit down there were quaint old carven chairs.

The value of the contents of that studio must have been great, for James Magnus earned a great deal of money, and never grudged spending it upon what he called necessities for his art. Hence it was that handsome vases and specimens of bronze and brass work were plentiful, but they were stuck anywhere, and as often as not held empty or full paint tubes, or served as supports to great palettes covered with pigments of every hue.

The sitting-room was almost a repetition of the studio, but it was thickly carpeted, and contained more furniture, with easy-chairs, a dining-table of massive oak, and had a free and easy, chaotic comfort about it that would make a bachelor feel quite at home.

The walls bore plenty of pictures, mostly from the brushes of brother artists, and these, with the great full folios, formed a most valuable collection.

It was here that Harry Artingale had taken most pains, as a very old friend and constant companion, to embellish the room with his cigar ends. Here, too, he had at odd times shown his own love and reverence for art by improving some of the antique casts with whiskers and moustachios. There was a cast of Venus quite life-size, which, evidently for decorous reasons, he had dressed in a seventeenth-century brocade silk dress, from which she looked naïvely at a lay figure in Spanish costume and mantilla ; while close by there was an Apollo Belvedere, half garbed in sixteenth-century armour, standing behind a large pair of jack boots that could not be put on.

There were, in fact, a hundred playful little relics of Lord Artingale's diversions when in idle mood ; one of the latest being the boring of a hole in a plaster Clytie's lips, for the insertion of a cigar, and another the securing of a long clay pipe and a beer bock in the

hands of a Diana, from which a bow and arrow had been removed.

“You see, he is sech a gent for his larks,” said Burgess, a nobly bearded, herculean, ungrammatical being, who looked big and bold enough to attack a Nemæan lion, or stride to an encounter in a Roman amphitheatre, but who had about as much spirit as a mouse.

Burgess was Magnus’s factotum, valet and houseman; and an excellent cook. He was not clever at cleaning, but the artist rather liked that, especially as he could admirably make a bed, and in addition was one of the noblest-looking and most patient models in London.

But now Burgess was developing a fresh facet in his many-sided character, namely that of nurse; and he had shown a sleeplessness and watchful care that were beyond praise.

“How is he, my lord?” he said, as he opened the door to Artingale, some months

after the occurrences in the last two chapters.

“Well, my lord——”

“Now look here, Burgess; haven’t I told you a dozen times over to say ‘sir’ to me when I’m here?”

“Yes, sir, but these are serious times, and I only meant it out of respect.”

“I know—of course, Burgess; but isn’t he better?”

“He says he is, sir; and the doctor—he’s only just this minute gone, sir.”

“Yes, I know. I saw his brougham.”

“The doctor says he’s better, sir, as he has for months; but he do keep so low, and,” continued the man in a despairing tone, “it ain’t no matter what I cook or make up, or try to tempt him with, he don’t seem to pick a bit.”

“Poor fellow!” muttered Artingale, handing his overcoat and hat to the man.

“I did think this morning that he was coming round, sir, for he has had his colours

and a canvas on the bed, and I had to prop him up. I don't know, sir, I——I——”

The great Hercules of a fellow's voice changed, and he turned aside to hide the weak tears that gathered in his eyes, and began to trickle slowly down his cheeks, though they had not far to go before they were able to hide themselves in his beard.

“Oh, come, come, Burgess,” cried Artingale, who felt touched at this display of affection on the part of servant towards master, “it isn't so bad as that.”

The man hastily threw the light overcoat upon a chair, and turned sharply round to catch the visitor's arm, and gaze earnestly in his eyes.

“Do you—do you really think, sir, that poor master will get well?”

“Yes, yes, of course I do, Burgess. I feel sure of it, my dear fellow. There, shake hands, Burgess. 'Pon my soul I like you, I do indeed.”

“And him a real true lord!” thought

Burgess, as he gingerly held out a great hand, which the other shook.

“Get well? of course he will, if it's only to help me break that scoundrel's neck,—a blackguard!”

“I only wish I had my will of him, sir,” cried Burgess, grinding his teeth; “I'd serve him out.”

“Would you?” said Artingale, smiling. “What would you do?”

“I'd make him stand for the old man in the Laocöon sixteen hours a day for stoodents. He wouldn't want anything worse. But please go in gently, sir, and don't wake master if he's asleep.”

“All right,” was the reply; and the young man made his way carefully amongst the artistic lumber, and through the studio into the dining-room, at one corner of which was the artist's chamber.

Artingale sighed as he went silently across the thick carpet, for that room was full of

memories of numberless merry evenings, and as he paused for a moment beside his friend's empty chair, a dull sense of pain oppressed him, and he found himself wondering whether he was not taking too sanguine a view of his old companion's state.

"Poor old chap!" he said. "How nice it would be if that could come off. Cynthy says it shall, and I don't see why it shouldn't. Let's see; I'm to give him Cynthy's love and this rosebud. She said he would be sure to find out that it was one that Julie had worn. I wonder whether old Mag does care for her; he's such a close old oyster, and never did make up to women. Well, for the matter of that, no more did I till I met Cynthia—not much."

He went gently on to the door in the corner, and listened, but all was very still, and he paused for a few minutes in a state of hesitation, for which he could not account, and with one hand raised to open the door.

"He must be asleep," he said to himself.

“Poor old boy, only to think of it. One moment bright and happy and full of life, and the next moment a helpless mass, with hardly the strength to move. Well, poor fellow, Cynthia is right. If he does care for Julie he has just gone the way to find a tender spot in her heart.”

He took hold of the handle and turned it, to find that Burgess had been so busy with a feather and the salad oil flask, that the door yielded without a sound, and he glided into the darkened room.

It was handsomely furnished, but its occupant's profession could be seen at every turn, for the rich litter of the studio that had overflowed into the dining-room, had come in here, and covered walls and filled corners with artistic trifles.

The room had been built for a smaller studio, and was lit from the roof, blinds being contrived so as to draw like a Roman *velum* across the glass.

These were partly undrawn now, giving a weird effect to the half-dark room, across whose gloom a boldly-defined broad bar of light, full of tiny dancing motes, shone down upon the artist's bed.

The door was by the head of the couch, and the figure of its occupant was hidden by the hangings, as well as by a carefully-arranged screen covered with fantastic Japanese designs, but Artingale felt a strange thrill run through him as he caught sight of the lower portion of the bed, and took a couple of steps rapidly forward, but only to stop short the next moment, as if paralyzed by what he saw.

CHAPTER XXXII.

MAGNUS MAKES CONFESSION.

Not many moments before, Artingale had wonderingly asked himself whether Magnus cared for her whom he regarded quite as a sister, and about whose state he was troubled in no small degree. The question was answered now without room for a doubt.

Poor fellow ! It had been a terrible cut he had received upon his head in the fall that night. There had been concussion of the brain, with fever and delirium, and for a long time his state had been very serious. Then came some slight amendment, but only to be followed, for months, by a depression which seemed to master the strong man's spirits ;

and this, too, in spite of the efforts of the medical men, constant nursing, and the companionship of Artingale, given to such an extent that Cynthia had pouted, and then thrown her arms round "dear Harry's" neck, and told him she loved him ten thousand times better for his devotion to his friend.

Artingale had been with Magnus the night before, but had been kept away that morning, and it was now close upon five o'clock when he stood as it were petrified at the sight which met his eyes.

As has been said, the greater portion of the chamber was in a state of semi-obscurity; but a broad band of light fell direct from the skylight upon the bed where James Magnus had been propped up with pillows before a dwarf easel and canvas, upon which, rapidly dashed in by his masterly hand, showing in every line the inspiration that had been thrown upon the canvas by the artist's mind, was the work upon which he had been engaged.

Had been engaged, for, palette in one hand, brush in the other, he had sunk back, his pallid face, with the hair cut closely now, giving him in the gloom wherein he lay the aspect of some portrait by Rembrandt or Velasquez, the stern lines cut by sickness softened by a contented smile.

He must have fallen back as he was raising his hand to continue his work, for the colour-charged brush in his thin white fingers had fallen upon the white sheet, making a broad smear, and as he gazed Artingale thought that he was dead.

It was but for an instant though, for the loose open collar of the shirt was rising and falling gently at each respiration, and even as the young man went over towards the bed a low sigh escaped from the invalid's lips.

Satisfied upon that point, Artingale's eyes were turned upon the canvas illumined by the soft white light; and for the moment, simple

and unfinished as the portrait was, he could almost have fancied that it was Julia's self gazing up at him with a sweet pensive smile upon her lips, but with the strange nameless horror in her appealing eyes.

It was wonderful. He had often watched with interest the way in which some face would grow up beneath the pencil of his friend, but in this case there was the effort of genius at its best, and he stood there gazing in rapt admiration at the portrait.

His question was answered, for no one but a man who loved could so perfectly have reproduced those features from memory:

"I wish Cynthia could see it," he thought; and he took another step forward.

That broke the sick man's slumber, for he started into wakefulness, and made a snatch at the canvas, to hide it from his friend, two red spots burning in his pallid cheeks, and a look of anger flashing from his sunken eyes; but Artingale laid a hand upon his arm.

“Don’t hide it, old fellow,” he said. “Why should you?”

Magnus looked at him as if in dread and shame.

“Why should you mind?” continued Artingale. “I’ve never been ashamed to confess to you. But how wonderfully like.”

Magnus still gazed at him in a troubled way, but he did not speak, and the two men remained looking into each other’s eyes as Artingale seated himself upon the edge of the bed.

“Mag, old fellow,” said Artingale at last, “I’m very, very glad.”

“Why should you be?” said the other, in a low, weak voice. “It is only an empty dream.”

“No, no. Nonsense, man. Why, come, with that idea in your brain you ought to be up and doing.”

“What!” said Magnus, bitterly; “trying to make her life unhappy by my mad love?”

“Mad love ! Is it mad to love a beautiful woman with all your heart, as I’m sure you do, with that confession before my eyes ?”

“Yes, when she is engaged to be married to another.”

“But that would never be if she knew of your love.”

“Harry, my dear boy,” said the artist sadly, “it comes very easy to you to make sketches or build castles in the air. You love little Cynthia, and your love is returned.”

“Yes ; of course.”

“And you both think how pleasant it would be for the sister of both to become the wife of the friend.”

“Yes. Well, where’s the madness ?”

Magnus shook his head sadly.

“Why should I tell you ?” he said. “I have studied nature too long not to know something of women. Do you think I could see and converse with—with—her without knowing something of her heart ?”

"Her heart is untouched. Of that I am sure," cried Artingale.

"I don't know that," said Magnus, sadly ; "but this I do know—that no word I could utter, no look I could give, would ever make it throb."

"Nonsense, man," said Artingale, merrily. "Why, Mag, where's your courage ? Up, lad, and try. Don't lie there and let that piece of imitation human being carry her off."

Magnus, who was very weak, lay back thinking.

"Why," continued Artingale, "you are bound to succeed. What could be better ? She was insulted, and you seized the scoundrel who insulted her, and became seriously injured in her service. Nothing could be more fortunate."

"Have you found out anything more about that fellow ?" said Magnus, at last.

"No : nothing ; and the police have given it up. I want you to get well and help me."

“Nothing more has been seen of him, then?”

“Indeed but there has,” said Artingale; “he has turned up no less than three times by the carriage when the girls have been out, and poor Julia has been frightened almost into hysterics. Come, you must get well, Mag, for if ever poor girl wanted a stout protector, it is Julia Mallow.”

“Tell me about her engagement.”

“What for? To make you worse?”

“It will not make me worse, Harry. Tell me. She is engaged to Perry-Morton, is she not?”

“Hang him! Well, I suppose there is something of the kind. My respected papa-in-law-to-be seems to have run mad over the fellow, and suffers himself to be regularly led by the nose. But it can’t last; it’s impossible. No sane man could go on long without finding out what an ass the fellow is, with his vain conceit and pretensions to art and poetry. It

is all the Rector's doing, and he is everything ; poor Mrs. Mallow, as you know, never leaves her couch."

"You said the other day that they were going back into the country."

"Yes, and I shall be obliged to go too."

Magnus smiled.

"Well, yes, of course," said Artingale, quickly, "I want to be near Cynthy. There, I'm not ashamed ; I am very fond of the little girl. I must be, or I should never stand those brothers of hers."

"Anything fresh about them ?" said Magnus, who seemed deeply interested in the conversation.

"Fresh ? Yes—no—only the old game. Being so near down there, my people hear everything at Gatley, and though I don't encourage tattling, I can't help hearing a lot about my beautiful brothers-in-law, and yours too if you like."

"Don't be foolish. Go on."

“Well, ’pon my soul, Mag, they’re a pair of scamps, and once I’ve got my little Cynthy, hang me if I don’t cut them. They haven’t the decency to wait till I am their brother, but are always borrowing money. Sort of blackmail for letting me court their sister,” he added, bitterly. “’Pon my word, Mag, it would be a charity to get Julia away as well.”

“It is a great pity,” said Magnus, thoughtfully. “What an anxiety to the poor sick mother!”

“Who is quite an angel of goodness in her way, Mag, only too ready to look over those two fellows’ faults. Bah! I haven’t patience with them.”

“Why does not the Rector get them away?”

“Get them away? Well, he has, over and over again, but they always come back. The townspeople call them *The Bad Shilling* and *The Boomerang* on that account. The Rector’s a good old fellow, only obstinate and weak,

and with too big an idea of his sacred prerogative, which the folks down there won't stand. Here, get well, Mag, and come down and help me rout the enemy."

"I wish I could," sighed Magnus.

"Only wants will, my lad. If you are using my billiard-table and horses it will keep those fellows off, but mind they don't rook you."

"I thought you told me that Frank had made a lot of money at the gold fields?"

"So he gives it out, but I don't believe it. If he had he wouldn't be borrowing of me and getting Perry-Morton to do bills for him."

"It seems strange."

"Strange! yes. I believe it's all gammon. Hang that fellow, I don't like him at all. Of course this is all in confidence, Mag."

Magnus looked up at him with a smile.

"My people tell me that he is always going over to Lewby, close by my place. It's one of the farms that came to me. Nice jolly farmer fellow there. Bluff chap, John Berry,

with a pretty little wife fifteen years younger ; and it seems there was something on between the lady and Master Frank before he went to the antipodes."

"That's bad," said Magnus, frowning.

"D——n bad," said Artingale ; "but I try to make it smooth by thinking he is interceding for his brother."

"Interceding for his brother ? What do you mean ?"

"Well, you see, Mrs. Berry was Rue Portlock, and Cyril has been paying attentions to her sister Sage."

"Rue ? Sage ?"

"Yes ; rum idea. Two such pretty girls. I call 'em the sweet herbs. Quaint idea of their father."

"And Cyril is paying attentions to one of them ?"

"Yes ; little Sage. She is the Lawford schoolmistress, and engaged to some one else."

"Humph! Better than paying attentions to a married lady, as his brother does."

"Oh, bless him, he is not perfect. Master Cyril has an affair on at the ford just outside Lawford. There is a pretty wheelwright's wife—no, hang it, I mean the pretty wife of a wheelwright there. She used to be Julia's and Cynthia's maid, you know, and I hear that Master Cyril has been seen hanging about."

"They seem to be a nice pair," said Magnus, gruffly.

"Beauties," said Artingale, sharply. "Hang 'em, they shall have it warmly when once I have got Cynthia away. Of course I have to swallow it all now. There, you see how badly you're wanted. It's an unhappy family, and you would be doing a charitable act in giving Julia a good husband."

"Let her marry Perry-Morton," said Magnus, changing his position with a weary sigh.

"Bah! you need not mind that, my dear boy. I feel certain that some fine morning

the Rector will prick Perry-Morton and find out what a bag of wind he is. Besides, see what allies you have—Cynthia, your humble servant, and the lady's heart."

Magnus shook his head sadly.

"But I say you have, and that it is waiting to beat to any tune you like to teach. Come, the will has no end to do with the body. Just swear you will get well and come and help me put those big brothers in order, and thrash the big rascal who—No, I say though, Magnus, 'pon my word, I think you ought to bless that fellow, for he will frighten poor little Julie right into your arms."

Whether it was his friend's encouraging words, and that hopes were raised in the artist's breast, or whether it was simply the fact that he was already mending fast, at all events James Magnus rapidly got better now, and at the end of another two months he was about once more, though still weak from his injury, and likely to be for months.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE RECTOR GIVES WAY.

CYRIL MALLOW was right. He had three women to fight upon his side, and he was not long in bringing their power to bear. Petted, spoiled son as he was, literally idolized by the patient invalid, to whom his presence formed the greater part of the sunshine of her life, he was not long in winning her to his side.

“It is no light fancy, dear,” he said tenderly, as he sat beside her couch. “She is to me the woman who will bless my life as you have blessed my father’s.”

The sick woman shook her head mournfully.

“I repeat my words,” he said: “as you

have blessed my father's life. Well, I have been restless and foolish, perhaps, but I am sobered down now, and I mean to marry. I cannot help it, mamma, and I am quite prepared to have plenty of opposition to my proposal, and to be told that I am marrying beneath me ; all the same, I mean to marry Sage Portlock, and I ask you to help me."

Mrs. Mallow tried persuasion, pointed out how directly this would be in opposition to his father's wishes, and how the Churchwarden had set his face against it ; but all she said only seemed to strengthen her son's desire, and the natural consequence was that very soon Mrs. Mallow began to talk earnestly to the Rector, but for quite a month without any other effect than angering him more against his son, whom he accused of fighting against his sisters' prospects.

But when the father began to find that with patient pertinacity the son was keeping up his pursuit of Sage, the words of his wife

began to have more effect, and one day, during a visit to the school, the old gentleman found himself speaking to Sage with greater deference, and thoughtfully musing over the possibility of her becoming his son's wife.

"It is terrible though," he mused; "just as his sisters are about to make brilliant matches. It is like degrading them."

That night, however, the Rector heard something about Cyril having been seen a great deal down by the ford lately, and quick to take alarm, warned as he had been by earlier escapades, he began to think more seriously, and went down to the school a great deal more.

"Better that than disgrace," he said; "a fresh scandal would almost kill her, poor sweet. Ah, me! she has much to bear."

He sighed weakly and went to the school again, setting Sage Portlock in a flutter by his quiet paternal ways, and he came away at last avowing that if the object of his son's

affections had been the daughter of a brother clergyman, he would have been delighted to find in her the child his son should bring to him to take a place within his heart.

Then he began thinking about Lord Artin-gale and Mr. Perry-Morton, and he grew angry; but again he was obliged to say to himself, It would settle Cyril perhaps. Better that than a fresh scandal.

He tried to find failings in Sage—seeing in her conduct cause of offence—but without avail, for she gave him no hold whatever, and he went away thinking of her deeply, and wondering what was to be the end.

Cyril Mallow smiled as he saw that he was right, and that it was only a matter of time. He liked Sage Portlock, and he told himself that he loved her passionately, and that without her he should die, and then he entered into pecuniary calculations.

“The old man must leave her at least half of what he has, and every one in Lawford says

he is well off, so that it will be a pleasant little bit of revenge to spend the old hunk's money for the way in which he abused me. Then there is poor mamma's money. That must come to me, so that we shall be pretty well off. Bah ! it will all come right in time. But I hope Frank is not playing the fool about little Rue."

After the stern encounter with the Churchwarden, and the angry words with his father, Cyril thought it prudent to keep away from Kilby Farm, and ceased to watch for Sage as she was going to or leaving school ; but he rearranged his seat in the rectory pew, so that he could see her where she sat in church, became more regular than ever in his attendance, and sat through his father's sermons gazing pensively at the young school-mistress.

People said he was growing pale and thin, which was a fact easily explicable, for he smoked from morning to night, and the

healthy brown of the last sea voyage was fading away consequent upon his indoor life.

"If I kick up a row I shall do no good," he argued, "so I may as well wait. I could persuade her to run away with me, but then we should be confoundedly short of money till the old folks forgave us, and I'm sick of that sort of thing. No, I think the injured dodge is best, for it pays all round."

He was quite right; and while he shut himself up with his brother in the room devoted to their personal use, read *Bell's Life in London*, and sent communications to one or two betting men in town whenever he had the necessary funds at his disposal, everything was working steadily to the end he sought to gain.

His quiet acceptance, as it seemed to the Rector and Portlock, of the commands which he had received, gave him, in the eyes of the other interested parties, an injured, martyr-like air, and, though she did not meet him

now, Sage's thoughts were none the less busy about him. His every word had impressed her deeply, and day by day, in spite of her efforts to be true to her promise, she felt that she was falling more and more away.

This was plainly shown in her letters to Luke Ross, to whom she wrote weekly, hearing from him regularly in return. But he noted the gradual change in her communications. They grew shorter by degrees ; less full of chatty little paragraphs about herself and her daily life. Still she did not fail to send to him once. It had become a habit—a duty—and while she did this she told herself that she was making a brave fight against her weak heart, and hiding the truth from Luke, little thinking that her notes laid her heart quite bare to the reader.

For it is a very strange thing how the feelings of a writer at the time of writing infuse themselves in the words. A note may contain only a thousand, and those thousand

words relate certain matters, but from one writer they will seem to flow with affection, from another be calm, cool, and simply matter-of-fact. The sentences shall be almost the same, the words be very little varied, and yet, even without endearing expressions, one letter shall breathe and emanate affection, the other be friendliness alone.

So, by slow degrees, it was with Sage's letters to her lover; and at first, as the idea stole upon him that she was growing colder, Luke Ross fought back the cruel thought, telling himself that he was wrong, and that hard study was souring his disposition, making him exacting and strange.

But as time went on he was obliged to realize the truth, and he wrote reproachful letters, but only tore them up again, to write others in his old, simple, confiding strain.

He longed to go down and see her more often, but kept putting it off till she should express a wish for him to come, hinting at it,

and expecting that some such invitation would be contained in the next letter ; but he hoped against hope.

Then a week passed without any communication from Lawford, and Luke packed up a few things in a bag, and started for his old home, but only to return directly to his chambers.

“She is not ill,” he said to himself. “If she had been some one would have written to tell me. I’ll wait.”

He waited, and at the appointed time—at the end of another week—a letter came, very similar to the last, and in which she said that she would have written as usual, only that she was very busy.

“Very busy,” said Luke to himself, as he sat in his dingy room, gazing straight before him, through the dull window, at the smoky chimney-pots, but seeing, as in a picture, the interior of Lawford Girls’ School, with its mistress moving from class to class. “Very busy.”

He sighed deeply, and went on with his reading.

From that time Sage's letters came fortnightly, Luke sending two for one, but he made no complaint, keeping rigidly to his old stern determination.

"I said I would place myself in a worthy position to win her," he said. "That I will do. What is more, I will be faithful, come what may—faithful, even in my belief in her."

He sat, hot of eye and weary of brain, thinking whether he ought not to go down and see why this gradual change was taking place, but in his stern repression of self he felt that to go down unexpectedly would be like mistrusting the woman he hoped to make his wife, and this he could not bear.

Study—hard study—was Luke Ross's medicine for a mind diseased, and whenever doubting thoughts and mistrust came hand in hand to torture him he forced himself to

attend to his studies, making, by prodigious efforts, great advances in the learned treatises he was striving to master, but only at the expense of his health.

"It is for Sage," he said, by way of encouragement, and when doubts became very strong he held up the shield of his faith.

"No," he would say aloud, "writing is, perhaps, irksome to one who has so much to do, but her heart is mine, and save from her own lips I would never believe that she could let it stray."

In his stern determination to master the profession for which he was reading, Luke Ross only allowed himself a very rare visit home; and though he had felt frequent urgings of late he fought them down, setting his teeth, and vowing that he would not go before the appointed time.

It was a terrible fight when once the dire attacks of doubt were made, and repeated from day to day, for during the weeks of the

past month Sage's letters had grown more irregular still, as if she felt emboldened to be more careless from that absence of reproach. But the truth was that every letter from London was read by Sage with bitter misery and reproach, and her replies were often so blotted with tears that they were destroyed instead of being posted, and it was only those which escaped the fire which he received.

It only wanted a week of the time he had settled in his own mind, and in spite of his efforts to be calm, it was almost more than he could do to keep on with his task. A strong feeling was urging him to go down at once, see Sage, and learn the worst, for a fortnight had again passed and no letter.

Twenty times over he threw his books aside and started up to go, but upon each occasion the indomitable power of will that helped him to make the great efforts to master his profession—a power of will that had already stood him in such good stead during his stay at St.

Chrysostom's—came to his aid, and he fought out the miseries of that last week and won. “I will—not—show—mistrust,” he said, sternly, as if addressing an unseen accuser of Sage; “I gave—her—my—love—and—I—will—never—take—it—from—her. If—she—cast—it—away—then—the—act—is—hers—not—mine.”

This, slowly repeated, with a pause between the words, became, as it were, a formula impressed in his mind, and it seemed to him that he had become Sage's advocate, bound to defend her against unseen accusers.

At last, having no longer any conscientious reasons for deferring his visit, he hastily packed his bag and closed up his dreary little chambers, feeling, as he went out into busy roaring Fleet-street, that the rest was absolutely necessary, for his head throbbed and seemed confused, troubled as it had been with conflicting emotions.

It was winter once more, but one of those

mild seasons when balmy winds from the west tempt the wild flowers into a belief that it is spring, and sweetly-scented violets make the air redolent of their homely, heart-appealing fragrance, when from amongst the dark dead leaves the tender green of the crinkled primrose roots could be seen surrounding here and there a pale sulphur blossom.

It was such a change from the smoke-haunted, soot-dotted city region of the law, that fifteen-mile coach ride, after the run down by fast train, that as Luke gazed over the flat landscape illumined by the mellow glow of the wintry sun, and noted the silvery bronze of the young oak stems, and the ruddy birch and ashes grey, he felt a joyous elasticity of frame ; his pulses throbbed with pleasure, and before they reached the town he determined to alight and follow the mossy lane to the left, two miles of whose windings would take him within a hundred yards of Kilby, the time fitting so well that he knew he should

intercept Sage as she left the school, which would not break up for the holidays until the following day.

Home again, after many months' absence—months of stern self-denial; and as he leaped down from his seat on the coach, leaving his portmanteau for delivery at the inn, he felt so boyish and light-hearted that he began to run along the lane.

“What nonsense!” he said, half aloud. “One shuts oneself up in that little hole and reads and reads till one's brain gets clogged, and full of unwholesome fancies. What a brute I am to let such thoughts creep in, when I'll wager anything that my darling is longing to see me back.”

He stopped to pick a primrose, then another, and a violet. Walked rapidly on again, but paused to select a couple of bramble-leaves of a most glorious deep green bronze. Then there was a beautiful privet spray, and another primrose or two, and by degrees, as he hurried

on with little pauses, a goodly wild bouquet had been culled, and he smiled as he saw in imagination Sage's delight at his present.

"Heaven bless her!" he said, half aloud, and, all unpleasant suspicions gone, he walked on with his eyes half closed, revelling in a kind of day-dream full of delights, the only jarring thought being that he was coming to see Sage before paying his duty to his father at home.

"He'll forgive me," he said. "He knows how I love her. Why, what a boy I feel to-day! It's this delicious air that has not been breathed by two million sets of lungs."

"There's the farm," he said. "How clean the windows must be to reflect the setting sun like that. Different to mine. I wonder how Mrs. Portlock is, and what the old lady will say?"

He hurried on, eager to reach the narrow cross where the Kilby lane and the one he was in intersected, and, once there, he meant

to mount the high bank, and wait by the old mossy oak pollard, watching for Sage's steps, so as to give her a surprise by throwing the bouquet of wild flowers at her feet, and then——

And then?——Alas! how pleasant is that habit of castle-building in the air. How brightly the edifices are raised, how quickly, how dismally they fall! Luke had planned all so well, and hurried on along the soft, mossy border of the lane, heedless of the winter's dirt, till he reached the cross, turned sharply, and then stopped short, uttering a low moan as he reeled against the hedge, clutching at the thorns for a support.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

AN INVITATION.

CYRIL MALLOW'S plan of playing what he called a waiting game had the effect he anticipated, and when he thought that the time was ripe he sent a very tenderly-worded letter, full of gentle reproach, to Sage, telling her that he had fought, no one knew how hard, to master his feelings, but that it was all in vain ; that he could not bear his existence there, and that he was going abroad—anywhere, he said—and he wished it was out of the world.

It was just at a time when the Rector was in high glee, for there had been no parish troubles for some time. He was beginning to make the people understand him, he told

the curate, who bowed and said nothing, though he did think about his efforts to preserve peace. Julia and Cynthia were staying in town with Claudine and Faustine Perry-Morton, an act of kindness those ladies said, while their dear brother was forced to be in Rome, where the new art. society had invited him to be president and inaugurate their proceedings. Then, although Frank was still at home, leading a life that, if he had been a poor man's son, would have been called "loafing," there was hope for Cyril, and a chance for weaning him from this attachment for Sage Portlock. In fact, jumping at a hint from the Rector, Lord Artingale had gone to Magnus and asked his advice, which was freely given, with a good idea or two how to set about it, and the result was that he had the pleasure of writing down to the Rector that the Duke of Borwick had given him an excellent post for his friend.

"It is only five hundred a year," wrote

Lord Artingale, "but I dare say something better will come."

The Rector took the letter into Mrs. Mallow's room after reading it in the grape house, where he had been busy trimming special bunches intended for the invalid's use.

"He's a good fellow, Artingale, a thoroughly good fellow," he said. "Sunshine at last for that unhappy boy."

"Our son, Eli," said Mrs. Mallow, reproachfully. "If he is unhappy, may not we be to blame?"

The Rector's delight was of short duration, for Cyril's next move was to tell his father flatly that he had not been consulted, and that he should decline the post.

"But you must take it, Cyril," said his father. "Why, my boy, I have been so full of hope that since our last quarrel you had seen the folly of your ways, and were becoming obedient, and willing to take your place in the duties of the world."

"I have tried," said Cyril, mournfully.

"You have, I know, my boy," cried the Rector, "and conquered."

"Conquered!" said Cyril, tragically. "No, father, I have obeyed you, and kept away from Sage Portlock, but I am more than ever her slave."

He strode out of the room, leaving the Rector wishing that the Portlocks had never come to Kilby, and that he had never made such a *protégée* of Sage, ending by going into Mrs. Mallow's room to pour out his complaints in her willing ear.

"What is to be done with the boy?" he said, dolefully. "I will never get into a passion with him again. But what is to be done? He has some plan in view."

"Let me see him," said Mrs. Mallow. "Give me some latitude, dear, and I will try to bring him to a better way of thinking."

"Do what you will," said the unhappy father, "only bring him to his senses. Here

have I been almost on my knees to Artingale to get him this post, and now he says that he will not have it."

"He would take it if we consented to his marrying Sage Portlock."

"But we can't, my dear. It is impossible," cried the Rector.

Mrs. Mallow was silent, and the Rector left the room.

Five minutes later, in obedience to her summons, Cyril was at his mother's side, talking to her in a depressed but very determined way.

"Go back with Frank, Cyril!" she said, piteously. "It would break my heart."

"You said that it would break if I were to die."

"Yes," she faltered.

"Well, I shall die naturally or unnaturally if I stop here," he said coldly. "I cannot bear it any longer. You know how I have tried."

Mrs. Mallow laid her hand upon her side.

"Then you must fight against all that pain and suffering for my sake, mamma dear," he said, bending over her, and kissing her tenderly.

"But you will take this post, Cyril?" she said, imploringly.

"What?" he cried, angrily. "No, I am going back to the other side of the world."

He strode out of the room, and for the next two or three days there was misery in the house. Cyril was ill, and kept his bed, and his fond mother, who believed in him thoroughly, seeing nothing in his nature but a little wilfulness, was in agony till, after a series of long consultations with the Rector, the latter gave way.

"If we do consent, I am sure all will be well," said Mrs. Mallow, feebly.

"If I give way, will he promise to take the clerkship?" said the Rector. "Artingale will

never forgive me if it is thrown up. He said that he had to beg for it humbly, and that he would never have done it but for me."

"I will undertake to say that he will," said Mrs. Mallow.

Just then the Rector sniffed.

"What is it, dear?" exclaimed the invalid.

"I smell burning," he said.

"Fire, dear?" she exclaimed, excitedly, as she thought of her helpless condition.

"No, dear," he said: "smoke."

"Then there must be fire," she cried, clinging to his hands.

"No, no," he said, trying to soothe her alarm. "It is tobacco. Surely Cyril would not smoke up-stairs?"

"Oh, no, dear; and he is too ill," said the fond mother. "Poor boy!"

"Then it must have been Frank down-stairs," said the Rector. "But to go back. Now, look here, dear, can you guarantee that?"

"I am sure I can."

"But it is such a descent. Think of Lord Artingale."

"Don't say that, dear," said Mrs. Mallow. "I have thought over it so long. You say yourself that she is a good, sweet girl, and I am sure when I saw her I thought so, too. Well, then, why should pride stand in the way?"

"Yes, she is very nice," said the Rector, "and I am willing to forget all about birth and position; but then there are our girls."

"But if it is to be the winning of our boy to the life we wish him to lead? I'm sure he loves her very dearly."

"Better than himself," said the Rector, bitterly.

"Oh, Eli, do not talk like that," sighed the invalid. "For my sake and his let pride be set aside. If Henry Artingale really cares for Cynthia he will not mind, and as for Mr. Perry-Morton, I heard when we were in town that his father made an immense fortune in

some very low class trade. Say *yes*, and let us hope that Sage——”

“Sage!” said the Rector. “Bitter herb! A pity it is not Rue. Bitter herbs for us to eat. Heigho! nothing but troubles, I suppose. Then you quite adopt her now?”

“For my boy’s sake—yes,” said the invalid.

“Then you do give way?”

“For the last time—yes.”

“And you will go and see the Portlocks?”

“Yes.”

“And I may tell Cyril this?”

“Yes.”

“God bless you, Eli! You are always good to me,” sobbed the poor woman; and the tears stood in her husband’s eyes as he knelt down and took her in his arms. At that time Mr. Cyril Mallow, the sick, sat up in bed and lit a fresh cigar before comfortably rearranging himself for a good skim of the sporting papers.

About a couple of hours after, as the Churchwarden was returning from a round

amongst his sheep, he caught sight of the Rector coming to meet him, when a long conversation took place, one that ended by the gate leading into the home close.

“Well, parson,” said Portlock, as they parted, “as I said before, I’ll make no promises but this—I won’t be hard. My niece’s happiness is what I wish to bring about before I die; and if she wants to have him, and he really will steady down and make her a good husband, why, I suppose it must be. Now I must go away and think.”

They shook hands and parted, the Rector going thoughtfully home with his hands behind him, and his stick whisking right and left, tail-fashion, and up and down, while he talked to himself about his weakness in giving way, and wondering what was to be the outcome of an arrangement that seemed like breaking faith on his part with Luke Ross.

As he reached the gate he smelt the smoke of a cigar, and, in spite of his knowledge of

his son's ways, he could not help feeling surprised at the sight of Cyril coolly walking up and down, the message he had had from his mother having apparently effected a miraculous cure.

"Better, Cyril?" he said, drily.

"Yes, sir, I'm pretty well all right now," was the reply; and the Rector sighed, and began to feel a strange sensation of regret stealing over him, as once more he asked himself what was to be the end.

Meanwhile, the Churchwarden had gone on to the farm, and entered by the kitchen door, where Mrs. Portlock was busy dividing her attention between scolding the maids and mincing meat for sausages.

He gave her a short nod, and went on into the parlour, treading upon the mats so as to make no sound, and there finding Sage so preoccupied that, as she sat with her back to him, she did not notice her uncle's entrance.

Pen, ink, and paper were before her, and on her right an envelope.

This was directed in a plain, clear hand—so plain that the farmer could easily read it from where he stood.

It bore the name of Luke Ross, and she had prepared the envelope before writing her letter, for upon the sheet of paper was the date, and then came the three words, “My dear Luke.”

That was all, and the marks that followed upon the paper were made by tears.

“It is like living a lie,” he heard her say, with a passionate sigh; and then she started up, for she became aware of her uncle’s presence in the room.

“Why, Sage, lass,” he said, gently, “do you always cry over your letters to Luke Ross?”

She looked piteously in his face, but said no word.

“Is it because he is so long away, my lass?”

Well, well, we shall have him back these holidays, and it won't be long."

He was watching her intently as he spoke, and he saw that not only did she turn pale, but a spasm as of pain crossed her face.

"Thou dost not look well, my pet," he said, gently. "There, there, put the writing away, and come and sit by me while I have my pipe. I don't like my little one to be so dull. Why, Sage, what's come of all the songs? You used to be always singing and making the house cheery. I'm thinking you work too hard."

"Oh, no, no, uncle," she cried, forcing a smile.

"Then you think too much, child. You must have more change. Parson didn't come in here, did he, my lass?"

"No, uncle," she said, starting.

"No, I thought he wouldn't; but he came to meet me, and he brought a message for thee, my girl."

"For me, uncle?" she cried, crimsoning to the parting of her hair.

"Aye, he did. He says he has to be out a deal, and Mrs. Mallow finds it lonesome at times without her girls; and he said, as a favour, would you mind going up and seeing her, and sitting with her and reading a bit?"

"Oh, no, uncle," faltered Sage, crimsoning more deeply, every trace of emotion being duly noted by him who was probing her to the quick. "But would Mrs. Mallow——?"

She paused without finishing her sentence.

"Like it?" he said, finishing the sentence for her. "To be sure she would, my pet. What a one I am to deliver a message. It was her who asked the Rector to bid you come; and, as I thought you wouldn't mind, I just said that you would go."

"Oh, uncle, but I—I dare not," cried Sage, excitedly.

"Stuff! Tchah! Nonsense, my dear. What's to be afraid of! They're gentlepeople,

I s'pose, but they're only human beings after all, and you've nothing to be ashamed of, I'm sure. I told parson you'd go on this afternoon, as there was no school, and he said I was not to be uneasy, for some one should see you home."

Sage's colour came and went as she sat there trembling, and painfully conscious.

Some one should see her home—some one should see her home. The words kept repeating themselves in her ears till she felt giddy.

What did it all mean? Why did her uncle speak to her in this gentle way? What more had passed between him and the Rector?

She gazed in his face at this, and a score more such questions repeated themselves, while the answers seemed far away.

"Go up to the rectory to-day, uncle?" she faltered at last. "I dare not go."

"But I wish you to go," he said, decidedly, and Sage's heart gave one great joyful throb.

Had it been left to her she would have stayed away, but her uncle wished her to go—he literally bade her go.

The end of the matter was, that after being egged on by her aunt to dress herself in the showiest things she possessed, and having the good sense, in spite of the feeling of delirious joy that had taken possession of her, to attire herself with great simplicity, she walked, with fluttering heart, up to the rectory, where the Rev. Eli Mallow himself met her at the door with a paternal *empressement* of manner that was quite tender in its way, as he drew her hand through his arm, and led her up-stairs to Mrs. Mallow's room.

CHAPTER XXXV.

WELCOMED.

SAGE trembled as she accompanied the Rector, and in her agitation everything seemed unreal and strange. A mist floated before her eyes, and the room seemed to be sailing round, till she felt herself led to a chair, and a thin, soft, cool hand take hers, drawing her forward, till she bent down, and felt a pair of lips press her cheek, and sigh gently.

“I am very glad to see you, Miss Portlock—I think I may call you Sage now.”

She answered something that was inaudible to herself, feeling angry the while at what she called her awkwardness and confusion, as she longed for confidence, and the power to be

more at her ease, little thinking that her timid, modest behaviour was winning a way for her rapidly in the poor invalid's heart ; while, in spite of the pride that interfered somewhat with the Rector's generosity of feeling, he could not help thinking that after all, with such a woman for his wife, a change for the better must follow in his son.

By degrees Sage grew more composed, especially when the Rector patted her gently on the arm, and asked her to excuse him while he wrote a letter or two for that day's post ; "to my daughters in town, my dear," he said ; and she was left alone with Mrs. Mallow, whose careworn but sweetly-pensive face looked up, smiling tenderly in hers.

It was a delightful afternoon, and Sage would have been truly happy if she could have stood out fully in the sunshine instead of in the shadow cast across her thoughts by the remembrance of Luke Ross.

Nothing special was said, but it was quite

patent to the visitor that all objection to Cyril Mallow's attentions to her had been withdrawn on either side, and that she had been asked up there that Mrs. Mallow might welcome her as her son's future wife.

Sage's heart beat fast, for she owned to it most fully now. It was wrong. She was faithless, but she did love Cyril, and giving herself up to the current of joyous thoughts, she allowed it to bear her softly on.

The interview grew more dream-like to her minute by minute as she listened to the burden of Mrs. Mallow's discourse, and fetched for her books, pictures, little drawers, and folios, whose contents the fond mother never wearied of displaying. Always the same tune, "My sons," and ever something fresh to display. Cyril's first copybook, his early letters to her from school, the sketches Frank had made, a little piece of poetry he had tried to write and never finished, broken toys, Cyril's baby shoes, one after the other, an endless

list of little trifles, all of which had to be carefully returned to their places in the treasured store.

Then the fond mother poured into the nowise unwilling ears anecdote after anecdote of Cyril's goodness, the endless little attentions he had paid her, and the presents he had brought again and again—anecdote and present being of the most ordinary type, but gilded and burnished by motherly love till they shone with glowing lustre in Sage's eyes.

It was a delicious time, and there was a soft, warm glow in her cheeks as she entered so thoroughly into the mother's feelings, gaining confidence by degrees, but only to blush with confusion, and then turn pale with the pang she felt as Mrs. Mallow drew her down into a close embrace, and whispered, softly—

“Bless you, my child! I am not surprised that Cyril should love you with all his heart.”

The tears of both were flowing, and the

aching pain increased as Sage thought that Luke Ross also loved her with all his heart.

But there was no time for such thoughts, for just then the door opened softly, and the Rector entered, Sage starting up and looking confused ; but she was set at ease directly, for he took her tenderly in his arms and kissed her, saying—

“ God bless you, my child ! We must have no half welcome now. I see you have won poor mamma’s heart, so I surrender mine. There, there, my dear ; don’t cry ! You have a pleasant little mission here.”

Sage looked up at him wonderingly.

“ To make three people very happy, my dear, and that I am sure you are going to do.”

“ And so am I,” said Mrs. Mallow, fondly. “ Where is Cyril ? Ask him to come to us now.”

“ I—I don’t know,” said the Rector, hesitatingly. “ I did look round, but not seeing him, I thought he would be here.”

"He did not know. You did not tell him," said Mrs. Mallow.

"That Sage would be here? Oh, no. I left him to find that out," said the Rector, playfully. "But I am not sorry, my dear, for I feel as if we ought to monopolize some one's attentions ourselves to-day. The next time she comes we shall be set aside, being only the old folks."

He smiled at Sage, and in a timid way she smiled back at him; but the same thought was in both their breasts, and each tried to read it through the other's eyes.

The thought was of Luke Ross, which was agitating them both, for they were thinking of the day when they would have to face him, and give account of that which had been done; and as this dark shadow loomed up in the distance, the question arose—

What shall I say?

Cyril did not put in an appearance that day, and Mr. and Mrs. Mallow had their visitor

entirely to themselves, with the result that when it was time for her to go, all thoughts of pride and differences in caste were gone, Mrs. Mallow kissing her very affectionately.

"I can't come to you, my dear; but you will come to me often—very often—promise me that."

The answer trembled upon Sage's lips. It was "Yes," but she hardly dared to utter it, and it was taken from her.

"I will say it," said the Rector. "Yes; she will come very often. Sage, my child, I never thought of this, but the future is hidden from all our eyes. You have been here to-day to see us in the character of the woman our son has chosen for his wife. Heaven's blessing be on you, my child; he could not have made a worthier choice."

Sage placed her hands in his, and once more he drew her to his breast, and kissed her broad white forehead.

"There," he said cheerily, and with a smile,

“kiss mamma, and then I’ll trot down home with you, for it is too dark for you to go alone. I think, mamma, dear, we’ll set aside all form and ceremony from now. What do you say?”

“Oh yes, yes. Let there be no scruples to keep you away, my dear. Of course,” she added, smiling, “you will come to see this poor invalid. Come and read to me as often as you can, for my daughters are beginning to forsake me a great deal now. Ah! you young people, you get strange fancies in your heads. You promise?”

She promised, and soon after the Rector was taking her home, chatting to her pleasantly, as if there was to be no more constraint; but all the same he could not help thinking about him who filled his companion’s thoughts, to the exclusion of Cyril.

How was Luke Ross to be met?

And at the same time, the fond mother, lying upon her couch, had her shadows to

darken the happy thoughts that were brightening her life.

Was it just to Sage Portlock to let her become the wife of such a son as hers?

She trembled and grew agitated at the thoughts, which were cleared away as Cyril suddenly entered the room.

“Here, I say,” he cried, “what does this mean?”

“What does what mean?” said Mrs. Mallow, smiling affectionately.

“They say down-stairs that Sage—Miss Portlock—has been here.”

“Yes, my son, and she has just gone back with your father. Come and sit down by me, Cyril.”

If her words were heard, they were not attended to, for Cyril darted down the stairs and out of the house, leaving Mrs. Mallow to sigh, and, as a despondent fit came on, to wonder whether they had done right after all.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

AT THE TURNING.

CYRIL had his run for nothing more than to accompany his father, whom he met returning home. But the Rector was in a most genial frame of mind, and father and son came back to the rectory in the highest of spirits, Cyril bounding up to his mother's room without a trace of illness left.

“Take the post? That I will, and we’ll forget all about the past,” he cried. “I am glad you like her. She’s the dearest and best of girls, and I love her. There, I’m not ashamed to say so. I do love her dearly, and ten times more for her nice, modest, retiring ways. Father, I’m going to settle down with

the best of wives, and—oh, hang it all, I wish I'd known you were going to bring her here. I say, what a good old fellow you are!"

And plenty more in the same strain, so that as the question was discussed the hours flew by, and Mrs. Mallow, weary though she felt with extra exertion, felt that happy days were coming once again, and she went at last to her pillow to dream of the girl who was to bring peace to her home, and restore her errant boy, bringing him from a reckless, careless life to one that was to do honour to them all.

"Quite well, thank you!" said Cyril to himself, as he leaped out of bed the next morning, and, after dressing, lit a cigar for what he called a matutinal whiff, but really under the impression that he could think better under its influence.

For there was a good deal to be thought about that day, and a good deal to be done.

"I shall have to talk pretty seriously to

Master Frank," he said. "There must be no nonsense if Sage is to be my wife. Let's see if he is up. No, I'll leave it for the present; I don't want him to turn nasty if I can help it."

He knew, from the previous night's conversation, that the Churchwarden had made no further objection to his suit, and, under the circumstances, he felt that the proper course would be for him to go straight over to Kilby Farm, and in a frank, manly way thank him, and talk to him of the future.

"Hang it all, though," he cried, pettishly, "I hate the very idea. It makes a fellow seem such a fool. *Ask papa!* Hang papa. I don't think I shall go."

He went down to breakfast, and when it was over the Rector said—

"By the way, Cyril, I think I'd walk over and see Mr. Portlock. He would like the attention, and it is your duty to pay him all respect."

“Oh, yes; of course, father,” he said, impatiently.

“But don’t go down to the school, Cyril,” said the Rector, rather anxiously.

“Oh, no; of course not,” said the son.

“We need not mind what people say, but it is as well not to give them cause for chattering. There is nothing to be ashamed of, but while Sage has the school we’ll let matters go on as usual.”

“But she must not stay there, father.”

“Certainly not, Cyril. I’ll chat the matter over with Portlock, and see about a fresh mistress as soon as possible.”

“That’s right,” said Cyril; and before his father could say more he was gone.

“Get a new mistress—get a new master,” muttered the Rector, tapping the table with his well-pared finger-nails. “Why, it is near the time when Luke Ross will be back. Tut—tut—tut! It is a most unfortunate affair.”

It was so near the time that Luke Ross was

already on his way to the London terminus, and a few more hours would see him at Lawford.

“Well, well, I’ve nothing to do with that,” said the Rector, impatiently. “Sage and he must settle the matter between them. She evidently never cared for him, and—tut—tut—tut! Well, there, I’ve done all for the best.”

He went off to solace himself with a look at his flowers, and tried to forget what entanglements might ensue; while Cyril, with his hands in his pockets, smoked cigar after cigar, as he fidgeted about in his own room, trying to screw his courage up to the proper point for a visit to Kilby Farm, for, truth to tell, the nearer the necessity for an interview with the Churchwarden, the less he felt disposed to undertake the task.

“There,” he said, impatiently, “morning’s a bad time. He’s sure to be busy. I’ll go after lunch.”

Lunch-time came, and the Rector smilingly asked him how he got on with Mr. Portlock:

"Haven't been yet. Going directly after lunch," he said shortly; and, to prepare himself for his task, he paid a good deal of attention to the sherry decanter, and, after lunch, smoked a couple more cigars, as he hesitated and hung about.

"Well, I will go now," he exclaimed, and, rousing up his courage, he went across the fields towards Kilby Farm, but turned off before he got there, and went strolling along the lane.

"Hang the job," he muttered. "I hate it, but I must go, though, I suppose."

He turned back, and somehow began thinking of Luke Ross, who was speeding light-hearted enough upon his journey.

"Poor cad!" he said, half aloud. "How wild he will be!"

Once more he neared the farm, and once more he hesitated and turned off.

"I can't face the old boy alone," he cried, impatiently. "What does it matter? He knows nothing of etiquette. I shall go and meet Sage and then we can go in together. It's all nonsense to be so formal."

He seemed to be quite relieved upon coming to this determination, and, seating himself upon a gate, he sat swinging his legs to and fro, whistling, and consulting the watch he carried from time to time, till, coming to the conclusion that it was just about the right moment for meeting Sage as she left the school, he leaped down and made off in the direction of the town.

"What a good, obedient son I am," he said, with a mocking laugh. "Here I promised that I would not go to the school, and I have waited like a lamb until she comes out."

"Well, the trouble's over, and I've won," he said, as he walked on. "Has the game been worth the candle? She's very nice, and the old folks will come down handsomely, of

course, and I shall have to go up to town to this precious office. Hang the office! Well, it won't be so dull as it is down here."

"Little wench is late," he muttered, gazing at his watch, and yawning. "Hang it, I've smoked too much to-day. Wonder whether she'll smell my breath. She's a nice little lassie after all. Ha, ha, ha! Poor old Luke Ross—what a phiz he will pull when he finds that he has been cut out! There she comes!"

He hastened his steps as he caught sight of Sage, and the next minute he was at her side.

"Why, Sage," he said, "did I startle you?"

"Yes," she said, trembling. "No, I am not startled;" and her blushing confusion made her look so charming that a good deal of Cyril Mallow's indifference was swept away.

"If I had only known that you were coming to our place last night!" he said, tenderly.

"Didn't you go away on purpose to avoid me?" she said, with a touch of coquetry.

"Go away? For shame!" he said. "When

I have thought of nothing, dreamed of nothing but you, Sage, all these long weary days. Oh, my darling, now the difficulties are all over what am I to say ? ”

In her happiness and excitement there was a strange mixture of yielding and confusion in Sage's manner ; she glanced at him proudly, her heart bounding with joy at his every word, and then she felt that she was being unmaidenly, and tried to be more reserved.

But she could not help his drawing her hand through his arm, and though she tried to pull it away from his grasp, he would hold it ; and at last, ready to cry hysterically—ready to laugh with joy, she walked on by his side, feeling happier than she had ever felt before.

For Cyril Mallow knew how to woo, and as he lowered his voice to a low, impassioned tone, he told her of his love, and how he was coming straight on with her to the farm. That he was the happiest of men, and that if she was cold and distant to him now it would

break his heart. With all this breathed tenderly in her ears by one she really loved, it was no wonder that she grew less distant, and ceased to try and draw her hand away. Indeed, somehow poor Sage did not in her agitation seem to know it when a strong, firm arm was passed round her waist in the narrow part of the lane, down between the banks, where no one was likely to see.

All was a delicious dream, full of oblivion of the past, till in one short moment, as with head drooping towards Cyril Mallow, she hung upon his words, her heart throbbing, her humid eyes soft and liquid with the light of her young love, she felt turned, as it were, to stone, and stood with parted lips, staring at Luke Ross at the turning as he reeled against the hedge.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

LUKE ROSS'S RECEPTION.

It was as if nature sorrowed o'er the scene, for as the encounter took place the rich, warm glow of the winter sunset passed away, and with the black clouds rising in the west came a chilling wind, and a few scattered drops of rain pattered amidst the fallen leaves where a short half-hour before there were the warmth and suggestions of spring. Now it was winter—bitter, depressing winter—all around, and in the hearts of those who stood there pale and gray as the gathering night.

Luke Ross was the first to recover himself as the giddy sensation passed away. The blood seemed to surge to his brain, and, with

a cry of rage, he dashed at Cyril, and seized him by the throat.

“How dare you!” he cried. “You have insulted her.”

Almost as he spoke his hands dropped to his side, and he stood motionless, gazing, from one to the other, at Sage shrinking back, with her hands covering her face; and Cyril, who had now got the better of his surprise, standing in a menacing attitude, ready for his assailant.

For the moment, now, Luke seemed stunned; he could not realize the truth of what he saw. Either, he told himself, it was some mistake, or his eyes deceived him, and he had not seen Sage Portlock—the woman who had promised to be his wife—half embraced by Cyril Mallow, to whom she seemed to cling.

At last he found his power of speech return, but so unreal did everything seem that he hardly knew his own voice as he exclaimed—

“Sage, speak to me. What does this mean?”

Her hands fell from her face, and she started violently at the bitter tone of reproach in his words, gazing wildly in his face, her lips parting, but no sound coming from them.

“Tell me that this is not true—that I was half blind—that you do not care for him—Sage, Sage—my darling!”

There was a piteous appeal in his words that made her shiver; and her eyes seemed rivetted to his, but she did not speak.

“Tell me, Sage! For heaven’s sake speak!” he cried, in a low, hoarse moan. “Sage—I cannot bear it. Sage—come to me—my own.”

He held out his hands to her as he spoke, and took a step towards her, his anguished face working with the agony of his soul.

But as he gazed yearningly in her eyes with his, so full of love, forgiveness, and tender appeal, she covered her face once more with

her hands, and seemed to cower in her abasement as she shrank away.

Cyril had been too much startled to speak at first; and the rude attack had sent a thrill through his nerves that was not the feeling experienced by the brave when suddenly moved to action; but now he began to recover his equanimity, and, taking a step in front of Sage, he made as if to take her hand.

“Really,” he said, “my good fellow, you have no right to——”

“Stop!” cried Luke, in so fierce a voice that Cyril remained for the time as if turned to stone, staring at the speaker, whose whole manner changed. He looked taller; the appealing gaze was gone, and his eyes seemed to flash, while his chest heaved, and his hands clenched, as he stood before them—no mean adversary for one who encountered him hand to hand.

“Sage,” he cried, and his voice was stern, fierce, and commanding. “A minute ago I

could not believe this. Tell me I was deceived. No : not now. Come with me to the farm." 5

He tried to take one of her hands, but she shrank, shudderingly, away.

"You shall speak," he cried.

"Oh, come," said Cyril, in a blustering tone, "I'm not going to stand by and listen to this. Sage, dear, this man has no hold whatever upon you. Come home with me."

"No hold?" cried Luke, quickly. "Why—but no; I will not speak to him. Sage, take my arm. I will not reproach you now. Come with me."

He caught her wrist, trembling the while with suppressed passion. But, with a quick flash of anger, she tore it away.

"Cyril," she cried, "protect me from this man."

Her words seemed to strike Luke Ross like blows, for he staggered back, his lips parted, his face ashy gray, and a look of despairing horror starting, as it were, from every feature ;

but as he saw Cyril Mallow take her hand when Sage turned from him, Luke's whole aspect changed, and, with a cry like that of some infuriated animal, he literally leaped at Cyril's throat.

Sage shrieked, and then staggered to the bank, cowering against the hedge, as, recovering himself from the attack, and driven to defend himself, Cyril seized his assailant, and for the next few minutes there was the sound of hard breathing, muttered ejaculations, the scuffling noise of feet upon the gravelly road, and then a heavy fall, Luke Ross being seen in the gathering gloom of the winter's evening to be above his rival, who lay motionless, with Luke's knee upon his chest, his hands upon his throat.

The sight before her nerved Sage to action, and she tottered to where the two men were.

"Luke," she cried; "Luke, are you mad? Oh, help, help, help!"

"Mad? Am I mad?" he said, hoarsely, as

Sage's shrieks rang out shrilly on the evening air. "Yes, I must be mad," he muttered, as he rose slowly to his feet, and stood gazing down at his lost love, who now threw herself frantically upon her knees, and raised Cyril's head upon her arm.

"And I came back for this," said Luke, in a husky whisper—"for this!"

But she did not hear him; her mind being taken up with the horror of her position.

"I came back for this," he continued, in the same low, husky tone. "I would not believe it true. Oh, Sage, Sage!" he groaned aloud, "it is more than I can bear."

He staggered away along the lane by which he had come, hatless, his coat torn, his throat open, and the rain, that had now begun to fall, beating upon his fevered head. Footsteps were hurrying towards the spot where he had encountered her he loved and his rival. But he heard them not; he only staggered on—on into the gathering night, with a vague feeling

that he must go away somewhere to find rest for his aching brain—anywhere to be away from her.

One moment he stopped, for he heard Sage's voice raised in a loud cry; but it was not repeated, and with a bitter laugh, he now tore on at headlong speed, running not from pursuit, but from sheer desire for action. On and on, quite heedless of the direction he took, so that he might get away—onward and onward through the wind and rain.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

A WILLING INVALID.

THE footsteps heard as Luke Ross hurried away were those of the Churchwarden. He had been round the farm according to his custom when his after-dinner pipe was ended, and then spent his usual amount of time over scraper and mat, getting rid of the superabundant earth that always seemed to cling to his boots.

"Shortest day, mother," he said, entering the long parlour where Mrs. Portlock was seated watching the fire, with her knitting upon her knees. "Be dusk directly. Sage come in?"

"No, not yet. It is hardly her time," was

the reply. "But you need not fidget about her."

"Wasn't fidgeting about her," said the Churchwarden, shortly, for the meaning tone in his wife's words annoyed him. All that afternoon he had been thinking of Luke Ross, and it had struck him that it was just upon the young man's time for paying a visit home.

"And then we shall be having him up here, and he'll learn all about Sage. Hang me if I think that I ought to have listened to parson as I did!"

These thoughts had come to him over and over again, troubling him more than he cared to own, for there was something frank and manly about Luke Ross that he had always liked, and in spite of his own uncompromising refusal to sanction any engagement, he did not feel happy in his mind about the treatment the young man had received.

"Look here, mother," he said, sharply, after

standing at the front door for a few minutes, watching for Sage's return, "this is your doing."

"What is my doing?" she replied; "but there, for goodness' sake, Joseph, do come in or stop out. You've done nothing but open and shut that door."

The Churchwarden shut the front door with a bang, and strode up to the fire.

"I say this is your doing about Sage, and I don't half like it after all."

"There, there, there!" she cried. "I wish to goodness you'd mind the farm, and leave women and their ways alone. What in the world do you understand about such things?"

"I don't think we've been doing right," he said; "and I'm afraid that no good will come of it."

"Stuff and nonsense, dear. Why any one, with half an eye, could have seen that the poor girl was fretting her heart out about young Mallow."

"She didn't fret her heart out about Luke Ross," said the Churchwarden, sturdily.

"About him!" said Mrs. Portlock, in a tone of contempt. "How could she? Cyril Mallow's worth a dozen of him."

"Proof of the pudding is in the eating," said the Churchwarden, kicking at a piece of blazing coal with his boot toe.

"Yes, and a very unpleasant bit of pudding Mr. Luke Ross would have been to eat. There, you hold your tongue, and let things go on. You ought to be very proud that matters have turned out as they have."

"Humph! Well, I'm not a bit proud," he replied; "and I'm very sorry now that I have let things go on so easily as I have. You may see Luke Ross when he comes down, for I won't."

"Oh! I'll see him," she replied. "That's easily done. Why, Joseph, you ought to be ashamed to think of them both on the same day. Our Sage will be his lordship's sister-in-law."

“Hang his lordship! Well, perhaps I am, wife, and it’s because I’m afraid that Luke Ross is the better man of the two. Why, look here, it’s getting quite dark, and that girl not home,” he cried, angrily, as he strode towards the front door.

“Do come and sit down,” said Mrs. Portlock. “She’s all right I tell you. I’ll be bound to say that some one has gone to meet her and see her home, and, look here, Joseph, don’t be foolish when Mr. Cyril comes, but make yourself pleasant to him for Sage’s sake. She quite worships him, poor girl.”

“Hah!” said the Churchwarden, with a grim smile upon his lip. “No one ever worshipped me,” and he opened the front door.

“Now don’t keep letting in the cold wind, Joseph,” cried Mrs. Portlock, and then, “Gracious! What’s that?”

She heard the faint scream of some one at a distance, but almost as it reached her ears the Churchwarden had gone off at a heavy trot

across the home field, in the direction from whence the sound had come, and he burst through the gate, to find Sage upon her knees, nursing Cyril Mallow's bleeding head, as the sound of steps was heard from the side lane.

"What's this? Who did this?" cried the Churchwarden. "Is he much hurt?"

"I—I don't know," faltered Sage. "Oh, uncle, uncle, is he killed?"

"Killed—no," said the Churchwarden, going down on one knee, "cut—stunned. How was it—a fall?"

"No, uncle," sobbed Sage, who was now half beside herself with grief—"they—they fought."

"Who did? Who has been here?"

"Don't—don't ask me," she sobbed.

"But I do ask you," cried the Churchwarden, sharply. "Why," he cried, struck as by a flash of inspiration, "Luke Ross has come down?"

"Yes," moaned Sage, with a sigh of misery.

"And he did this?"

"Yes, uncle."

"Humph! Then he's a plucked un!" muttered the Churchwarden, with a low whistle. "Well, anyhow we've got it over."

"Is—is he dead, uncle?" whispered Sage, hoarsely.

"Dead—no. I tell you his head's too thick. Well, you've done it, young lady. There, I'll stop with him while you run up and tell Tom Loddon and Jack Rennie to bring the little stable door off the hinges. We must get him up to the farm."

"Can't—can't I carry him, uncle?" said Sage, naïvely.

"Pish! what nonsense, girl. I don't think I could carry him myself. Let's try."

He placed his arms round Cyril's chest, and raised him into a sitting posture, the act rousing Cyril from his swoon.

"That's better. How do you feel now?" cried the Churchwarden. "He'll be able to

walk, and it will do him good. Come, Master Cyril, how do you feel?"

"Sick — faint," he replied. "Cowardly assault on a fellow."

He clung to the Churchwarden, for his head swam, but the sickness passed off in a few minutes, and then, leaning heavily upon the Churchwarden's strong arm, the injured man walked slowly across the field to where Mrs. Portlock was standing at the open door, Sage feeling sick and faint herself, as she followed close behind, bearing both Cyril's and Luke Ross's hats, that of the latter having been picked up by her without any knowledge of what she had done.

"What is it? What is the matter?" cried Mrs. Portlock.

"Help with thy hands, wife, and let thy tongue rest," said the Churchwarden, sharply; and in answer to the rebuke, Mrs. Portlock did help by drawing forward the great couch near the fire, and sending Sage for some pillows,

after which the latter supported Cyril, while Mrs. Portlock, with a good deal of notable quickness, bathed the cut at the back of the injured man's head, afterwards cutting away a little of the hair, and strapping it up with diachylon in quite a business-like way.

"Mother's good as a doctor over a job like this," said the Churchwarden, cheerily. "So am I. Here's your physic, squire. Sip that down."

The medicine was a good glass of brandy and water, of which Cyril partook heartily; and then, in obedience to the tender request of Sage, he lay down on the pillows, and half closed his eyes.

"Now, then," said the Churchwarden, bluffly, "what do you say? Shall I send over and tell them at the rectory you've had a tumble and cracked your crown, or will you have a cup of tea with us and then walk up? You don't want a doctor."

Cyril opened his eyes languidly, and gazed

at the Churchwarden. Then he let them rest on Mrs. Portlock with a pitiful gaze, finally turning them upon Sage, who was kneeling by him holding one hand.

Cyril Mallow's thoughts were that he should prefer to stay where he was, tended by the women, and he said, faintly—

“Doctor—please.”

“Nonsense, man,” cried Portlock, bluffly. “Why, where's your heart? Pluck up a bit. You don't want a doctor for a bit of a crack like that.”

“Oh, uncle, you are cruel!” cried Sage. “I am sure he is very much hurt.”

Her hand received a tender squeeze in response to this, and, in spite of her present misery, Sage felt her heart begin to glow.

“Not I, my lass,” said the Churchwarden, in his bluff way. “Perhaps some one else thinks that you are.”

Sage sank lower, and hid her face upon Cyril's hand.

"Let us send one of the lads," said Mrs. Portlock.

"All right," said the Churchwarden, good-humouredly. "Send word up to the rectory that Mr. Cyril has had a bit of an accident—mustn't say you've been fighting, eh?"

Cyril moaned softly, but did not speak.

"Say that he has had a bit of an accident, and that he won't be home for an hour or two. Would you like him to come round by the town and tell Vinnicombe to come up?"

"Oh, yes, yes, uncle," cried Sage, pitifully; and the messenger was sent off.

The doctor and the Rector arrived almost together about an hour later, during which interval Portlock had made himself acquainted with the circumstances of the struggle.

"And was Luke Ross hurt?" he asked.

"I—I think not, uncle," said Sage, colouring deeply, and then turning pale.

"Humph! Poor fellow!" said the Churchwarden. "Sage, my lass, you've behaved very

badly to that young chap, and no good will come of it, you'll see."

Mr. Vinnicombe did not consider that there was much the matter, that was evident; but he apparently did not care to tell his patient that this was the case, and consequently it was arranged that Cyril should stop at the farm, the best bed-room being appointed to his use; and he amended so slowly that he quite fulfilled a prophecy enunciated by the Churchwarden.

"Strikes me, mother," he said, "that you chap will be so unwell that he won't go away for a fortnight; and if you let Sage nurse him he'll stop a month."

Sage, to Cyril's great disgust, was not allowed to nurse him; but he stayed for a month all the same, fate having apparently arranged that, if Luke Ross's cause was not hopeless before, it was now wrecked beyond the slightest chance of being saved.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

FULLERTON'S PROPHECY.

IN a place like Lawford, where every one knew more of his or her neighbour's affairs than the individual could possibly know for him or herself, the encounter near Kilby Farm soon had its place as the chief item of news, and was dressed and garnished according to the taste of those who related it.

The principal version was that, stung by a letter sent by Sage Portlock, Luke Ross had come down from town and purposely left the coach at Cross-lane, so that he could waylay and murder Cyril Mallow with a huge hedge-stake which was picked up afterwards near the place.

For a short time the gossips were at fault for a reason, but they only had to wait patiently for a while, and then it was known throughout the place that Cyril Mallow was engaged to marry Sage—a matter so out of all reason to the muddled intellect of Humphrey Bone, the old schoolmaster, that he said it was enough to make widow Marly turn in her grave.

Why, he did not explain. It could not have been from jealous disappointment, for widow Marly had had a very fair share of matrimonial life, having married at the early age of sixteen, and being led twice afterwards to the hymeneal altar before dying at a very good old age.

“But it’s a wrong thing,” he said, at the King’s Head, during a course of potations—
“a wrong thing; and no good will come. Two sorts, oil and water, and they won’t mix. Tell parson I say so, some of you, if you like. It’s his doing to get the girl’s money, and it’s a wrong thing.”

In the midst of the many discussions in Lawford it was asked why Luke Ross was not to be prosecuted for assaulting the parson's son.

"Nice sort of fellow," said Fullerton; "goes to learn to be a lawyer, and comes down here and breaks the law."

"Ah! it's been a strange bad case," said Smithson, the tailor.

"Anybody seen owt of him since?" ventured Warton, the saddler.

There was silence for a few moments, and then Tomlinson spoke.

"I haven't seen him down," he said. "In fact, I know he has not been, for old Michael Ross has been up to see him and hear the rights of the case."

"Yes?" said two or three, eagerly.

"Ah! he don't say anything about the rights and wrongs; only that he doesn't think Joseph Portlock's girl behaved well to him."

"Oh! I don't know," said Fullerton. "What call had a girl like that to consider herself

bound to a wandering man who couldn't settle down like a Christian? I think she did quite right to give him up."

"And marry young Mallow?"

"But they are not married yet, my boy," said Fullerton, shaking his head; "and it's my belief that they won't be. He's a flyaway, wild, scapegrace of a fellow. It'll come to nought, but I do think young Ross ought to be punished same as any other man. Fair play and no favour for me."

"Very good sentiment, Mr. Fullerton," said Warton.

"Make it your own motto, then, Mr. Warton," said Fullerton, proudly. "As I says to Michael Ross, when I was talking to him, yesterday—no, it was the day before yesterday—no, stop, it *was* yesterday. 'I believe in fair play,' I said.

"'So do I, Mr. Fullerton,' he said; 'but I don't think my poor boy has got it here.'"

"Did he say that?" said Warton.

“Aye, that he did, and pst—here he is!”

There was a murmur in the inn room where the principal Lawford tradesmen were assembled, as old Michael Ross, the tanner, came in, looking very keen and dark, and as if close application to his trade had heightened the colour of his skin.

The old man seemed nervous, and as if he feared that he would not be counted welcome; but he soon found that if he would only discuss his son's conduct no one would be looked upon as a more welcome addition to the weekly meeting.

There was a pause for a few minutes, during which old Ross gave his orders to the landlord, and lit his pipe, smoking afterwards in quiet consciousness that he was being furtively glanced at by all assembled, and that it was only with the expectation of hearing more that they were so quiet of tongue.

“Been having a run up to London, Master Ross, I hear,” said Warton, the saddler, at last.

"Yes, Master Warton, yes ; I've had a run up amongst the soot and smoke," said Michael Ross.

"And was strange and glad to get back again, I'll be bound," said Tomlinson, while Fullerton lay back in his armed Windsor chair, staring straight up at the ceiling, with the calm self-satisfaction of a man who knew all that was being asked.

"Well, yes, neighbour," said Michael Ross, thoughtfully, "I must own that I was glad to get back again. London's a wearisome place, and the din and rattle of the streets is enough to muddle any man's brains. It was quite a relief to turn down the narrow lane to my son's chambers, and get out of the buzz and whirr. My bark mill's nowt to it."

"Saw your son, did you?" said Warton. "How's he getting on?"

"Oh, he's getting on right enough," said the old man, proudly. "He's getting on."

“Gotten to be a big loyer, eh?” said Smithson. “Why, Master Ross, sir, we shall hev to get him down here to take up our cases at County Court.”

“Nay, nay, nay,” said old Ross, chuckling. “Not yet—not yet. There’s a deal to learn to get to be a big loyer; but my son’s working away hard now he’s getting a bit over his trouble.”

“Trouble?” said Fullerton, bringing his eyes down from the ceiling. “He hasn’t got into trouble, I hope?”

“Nay, nay, only about the bit o’ trouble down here.”

“Not going to hev him before the magistrates, are they, Master Ross?” said Warton.

“Magistrates? What, my son?” said the old man, firing up. “Not they. He’d a deal better right to have some one else before them. My son never did no wrong.”

“But they say he knocked young Cyril about with a hedgestake,” said Smithson.

"Tchah ! Lies !" said the old man, angrily. "I dare say he hit him. So would I if I'd been a young man, and come back and found my young lady stole away like that. Yes, I'd ha' done the same."

"Hah, yes," said Tomlinson, thoughtfully, as if he were going back to past times. "It is hard on a man. But I don't know, Master Ross ; if a man's got a bad tooth it's best out, and it has saved your lad perhaps from many a sore and aching time in the future."

"I'm not going to say anything against some people we know, and I'm not going to say anything for them," said the old tanner, warmly. "All I do say is, that I don't think my son has had justice done him down here."

"Oh, don't say that, Master Ross," said Fullerton, importantly. "I'm sure the way in which he took our side over the school appointment was noble. He saw how unjust it was, and he drew back like a man."

"I don't know—I don't know," said Michael

Ross, with a dry chuckle. "I'm afraid there was something more than that at the bottom of it, though he never owned it to me."

"Ah, well," said Fullerton; "it's very evident that he won't marry Sage Portlock. Poor girl, it's a sad fall away."

"Yes," said Tomlinson, smoothly, "it does seem strange."

"Well, for my part," said Warton, "I wonder at Joseph Portlock, though I think it's his missus as is most to blame. I don't believe as young Cyril was much hurt."

"Not he," chuckled Smithson. "And there he's been for the past month, lying on the sofa, tended by those two women. I hear the parson's been every day, and they do say, that as soon as he gets better——"

"He's better now," said Warton.

"Well, then," chuckled Smithson, drawing one leg up under him upon his chair from force of habit; "suppose we say much better—they're to be married."

"Well, it caps me," said Warton; "I can't understand what it means."

"Money," said Fullerton. "Some people keep up their grand houses and gardeners and grape-vines, and get laying traps baited with pretty girls for young lords and people from London, and after all are not so well off as some who pay their twenty or thirty pound rent and have done with it. Joseph Portlock, I suppose, will leave all his money to those two girls some day, and it will be a nice bit. Pity he didn't keep Miss Rue for the other boy, and then parson would have been happy."

"When's Frank going back?" said Smithson, the tailor, for reasons of his own.

"I'd know; ask him," said Fullerton. "He's always going over to Lewby, so I hear."

"Well," said Warton, the saddler, "all I can say is, that if I was John Berry he shouldn't be always coming over to my house."

"'Tain't our business," said Fullerton. "I

should say, though, that Sage Portlock 'll have a nice bit o' money."

"Ah, there's a many things done in this life for the sake of money," said Tomlinson, sententiously.

"But it looks bad for a young fellow to be lying about on sofas all day long, coaxed and petted up by women, just because he has got a bit of a crack on the head. Doctor said to me, he said, when I asked him about the cut, he said, laughing all the while, 'It isn't as deep as a well, nor as wide as a church door,' he said; 'but 'twill serve—'twill serve.'"

"What did he mean by that?" said Warton.

"I don't know," said Fullerton, sharply. "I think it was some stuff or another that he'd read in a book. You know what a fellow he is for giving you bits out of books. Don't you remember that night at the annual dinner? He said, when they were talking about old Mrs. Hagley being a bit of a witch—"

"Ah, to be sure," said Smithson; "about the cellar."

"Yes," continued Fullerton; "he said, 'I can call spirits from the vasty deep. Landlord, go down to the cellar and bring up a bottle of the best French brandy.'"

"Ah, he's a queer fellow, is doctor," said Warton. "They won't live down here when they're married, will they?"

"Who?"

"Young Cyril Mallow and Joseph Portlock's girl."

"Oh, dear me, no," said Tomlinson. "Young Cyril has got a post under government, and it's settled that Miss Cynthia is to be married to Lord Artingale, and a house has been taken for young Cyril up in Kensington."

"Hullo, old fox," cried Fullerton.

"Yoicks, yoicks, yoicks, gone away," shouted several, uproariously.

"Come, out with it," said Fullerton. "I'll be bound to say you know all about it."

“Well,” said Tomlinson, with the calm reticence of one who felt himself quite at home in the matter, “I did hear a little about it.”

“From Joseph Portlock’s wife, I’ll be bound,” said Fullerton. “She’s been at your place three times lately.”

“I’m not going to mention any names,” said Tomlinson, with a sly, smooth, fat smile, “but I think I may venture to say that there’ll be a wedding somewhere within six months, and that those who are married will live in Kensington.”

“Aye, parson knows how to play his cards,” said Warton. “I suppose the eldest girl will marry that stout gentleman, Perry-Morton. Parson manages things well. Fancy bagging Lord Artingale for a son-in-law. Why, all Gatley belongs to him, and he’s an uncommonly nice fellow too.”

“Yes, his lordship’s all very well; but as to young Cyril and Miss Portlock, mark my

words, no good 'll come of it," said Fullerton, emphatically. "Mark my words: no good 'll come of it."

"I should be sorry if it did not turn out well, and so would my son be, I'm sure," said the old tanner.

"Why?" said Fullerton.

"Because Sage Portlock is a nice, superior sort of girl," said the old man, "and it is always grievous to see those you like come in for trouble."

"So it is," said Fullerton, "but trouble will come. Here's two clergyman's sons, who ought to be the very model of what young men should be, and has any one of you a good word to say for them?"

"Well, for my part," said Smithson, "a man as can't wear a honestly well-cut pair of trousers, made by a respectable tradesman, but must send to London for everything, can't have much balance in his nature."

"Quite right," said Warton. "Why, when

old Mallow set up the carriage, young Cyril—no, it was Frank—must go up to London to buy the harness, and it had to come to me for repairs in less than a month.”

“Well, for my part,” said Tomlinson, “I wish Sage Portlock health and happiness, and no disrespect to you, Master Ross, for every girl has a right to choose her own master for life.”

“I wish her health and happiness, too,” said Fullerton, rising, “and I wish she may get them. Good night, gentlemen; I’m for home.”

“Yes, it’s time for home,” said old Michael Ross, rising, and saying good night; and the two neighbours walked down the street together.

“Married, eh?” said Fullerton, with a sneer. “Well, just as they like; but mark my words, Michael Ross, it means trouble.”

“I hope not, I hope not,” said the old tanner, sadly, “for I liked Sage Portlock. She’s a very good girl.”

“Bah ! sir ; nonsense ! sir ; women are not much good as a rule, and she’s a very bad specimen. But, mark my words, sir, trouble, and misery, and misfortune. It will never be a happy match.”

And the prophet of evil went his way, leaving old Michael Ross to stand upon his own doorstep thinking.

“Poor lass, I liked Sage ; and though she has broken with my poor boy,” he said, “she’s not a bad girl at heart. Trouble, and misery, and misfortune—and all to come upon her poor weak head. Poor child—poor child. Luke will about break his heart.

“Trouble, and misery, and misfortune,” he repeated, sadly. “I hope not, from my very heart, but I’m afraid Stephen Fullerton is right.”

BOOK II.—“FORSAKING ALL OTHER.”

CHAPTER I.

AFTER A LAPSE.

THE Lawford people were disappointed, for the Rector thought it better, and the Portlocks made no objection, that the wedding should be as simple as possible, so there were no preparations to signify, only such as were made in a quiet way, and Luke Ross read one morning in the ‘Times’ that Cyril Mallow, second son of the Rev. Eli Mallow, had espoused Sage, daughter of the late Elias Portlock, Esq., of Melby, and niece of Joseph Portlock, Esq., the Hall, Kilby, Lawford. He had a letter afterwards from his father, giving him fuller information, and saying that Lord

Artingale was at the wedding, and Cyril Mallow's sisters were the bridesmaids, and that the young married people went off directly to Paris. That Frank Mallow had not gone back to Australia, and nobody knew when he would go. That Portlock the churchwarden had been very angry at having *Esquire* put after his name in the announcements; that he was very friendly when he met the tanner in the market-place, and desired to be kindly remembered to Luke.

The letter concluded with a hope that Luke would soon come down, but he was not to come unless he felt that he did not mind a bit; that they had a very pleasant little body for schoolmistress now, and that Humphrey Bone seemed just the same as ever, and that was all at present from Luke's affectionate father, Michael Ross.

Not quite all at present, for there was a postscript stating that the Rector was a good deal in trouble about his eldest girl, who

seemed to be getting in a bad way, but all the same, both she and her sister were engaged to be married.

Luke Ross put the letter away in a drawer with a sigh, and turned to his reading working as hard as man could work, for in this he found his only relief from the troubled thoughts that oppressed him, while the change that had taken place in him in a few months was almost startling.

As the time went on the Rector, far from feeling lighter in his burdens now that he had Cyril comfortably settled down, had two new sources of trouble: in his son Frank, who had made the rectory, or the town house that had been taken and handsomely furnished, his home. He said that he was going back to Australia, but not yet. Perhaps he should take a wife back with him.

The Rector's other trouble was Julia, who had grown so pale and weak that at last, partly in obedience to Mr. Perry-Morton's

desire, it was settled that Sir Emerton Riffley should be consulted, and that eminent and fashionable physician was asked to call.

Sir Emerton did call, and after a long visit, as he saw his patient had no complaint to make, none to describe, he settled that it was want of tone.

"There is a want of heart action, my dear madam," he said, though there were times when poor Julia's heart beat at a fearful rate.

"But you don't think——"

"Oh, dear me, no! Oh, *DE-ar* no! A course of tonic medicine, a little alteration in diet, and a short stay at the seaside will quite restore us."

"Do you think Brighton?" said Mrs. Mallow.

"Excellent," said Sir Emerton; "and it would benefit you as well."

"Or Bognor?"

"Nothing could be better."

"Perhaps Hastings?"

“My dear madam, if I had the choosing of a place for your daughter’s residence for the present, I should decidedly say Hastings,” replied the great physician, rising from the side table, where he had been writing out a prescription precisely the same as that which he had written for hundreds of other young ladies in his time; and then, after a very courtly smile and bow, he left the drawing-room. The Rector was summoned, and the next day the family was staying at the “Queen’s” Hotel.

“There, Julia,” cried Cynthia, when they had been down a few days, “I think this is delicious, though we might just as well have stayed at Lawford. I don’t know, though; I like the seaside, and we shall be as free here as at home in the dear old woods.”

Julia shuddered.

“Oh, you foolish girl! There, don’t think of that again. Let’s enjoy ourselves while we can. The Perry-Mortons will be here soon.”

"Are they coming down?" said Julia, with a look of dismay.

"Yes. Harry's aversion wrote to papa this morning, saying that they should be at Hastings on Saturday, so we've three whole days clear. What did Sage say in her letter?"

"Very little," replied Julia. "She said that Cyril had had some little trouble though at his office."

"I'm not surprised," said Cynthia, "but I hope he won't lose that."

"Hadn't we better turn back, Cynthia?" said her sister, with an uneasy glance round. "There are no people here."

"That's why I came," said Cynthia, merrily. "I like getting away to where we can be free. Come along; I'll help you down."

She held out her hand, but Julia did not take it, and after threading their way amongst the huge rocks and *débris* fallen from the cliffs at the eastern end of the town, they started onward, keeping close to the water where they

could, but oftener upon the shingle beneath the towering cliffs, along whose giddy edges some children were playing, as if safe as the gulls that softly winged their way above their heads.

"This is just what I like," said Cynthia. "There, I've made one of my feet wet. Never mind; sea water does not give colds. Isn't it a grand bit of coast, Julie? But, I say, suppose Bogey was to pop up now from behind one of those great pieces of rock. Oh, how stupid I am. Julie: darling sister, don't faint."

"No, no. I am better," exclaimed Julia, across whose face a spasm of dread had darted.

"It was dreadfully silly of me, dear, but don't you mind what I said. Why, Julie, we are as safe here as if we were in our own rooms. Nobody could come down those cliffs, and I feel sure that you will never see that creature again. There, be a woman. He could not tell that we were down here. Now, could he?"

“Cynthia,” said Julia, after a few moments’ pause, and as she spoke she gazed straight out to sea, “shall you think me very weak and foolish if I tell you what I think?”

“No, no, of course not,” said Cynthia, glancing furtively about, “only do try to be more firm.”

“I do try,” said Julia, with a catching of the breath, “so hard—so very hard; but that man seems to be my fate, and I feel now that go where I may, or do what I may, he is always close at hand watching for me. Even now I expect to see him waiting by some of these rocks.”

“Nonsense! foolish girl,” said Cynthia.

“And that, strive as I will, he will some day take me away.”

“What!” cried Cynthia, laughing merrily, “take you away!”

“Yes, dear,” said her sister, solemnly. “I feel it. I am sure of it.”

“But oh, what nonsense, Julie! You must

not let him. You give way to such thoughts. How can you be so foolish ? ”

“ Is it foolish ? I strive against the thoughts till I feel half mad, but I cannot get rid of them, and his words are ever ringing in my ears. Oh, Cynthia, sometimes I feel as if it is in vain to fight against my fate, and that I may as well be resigned.”

“ Oh, Julie, Julie, Julie ! ” cried the spirited little maiden. “ What am I to do to you— what am I to say ? Shall I whip you, or scold you, or have you sent to bed without any dinner ? It is too dreadful, and you shall not give way like this. Why, for shame ! I know somebody who is dying of love for you.”

“ Don’t name him, Cynthy dear ; I detest the sight of him and his sisters.”

“ No, no, I mean dear Harry’s friend, Mr. Magnus.”

“ Poor Mr. Magnus ! ” said Julia, dreamily. “ I am very glad he is well again.”

“But he is not quite well yet, poor dear man. I think a short stay at Hastings would do him good,” said Cynthia, archly.

“It was very brave and manly of him to do what he did,” said Julia, sadly. “I can never thank him enough.”

“Hush ! walk faster ; let’s get beyond those rocks, Julie,” cried her sister, excitedly. “He’s coming now.”

“Ah !”

Julia’s breath came with a spasm of agony, and her features seemed rigid.

“He hasn’t seen us yet,” whispered Cynthia, but with the same excitement in her voice. “Make haste.”

They almost ran on now, till they were obliged to pause for breath.

“Don’t look round,” whispered Cynthia, “whatever you do.”

“And we are farther than ever from the town !” moaned Julia, as she clasped her hands.

“Well, what does that matter?” cried Cynthia. “Why, Julie, how pale you look!”

“Oh, pray come on faster—faster,” whispered Julia.

“No, no, poor boy, I’ve led him dance enough. He may catch me now. Why, Julie,” she cried, “I declare I’ve frightened you. Oh, my dear sissy, I did not mean your Bogey: I meant mine. I wrote and told him we should be walking along here about four o’clock, but, of course, I never for a moment expected he would come.”

Poor Julia held one hand across her eyes as she drew a long breath of relief, and holding by her sister’s arm she walked slowly on, with her eyes closed, for they were now on a smooth stretch of sand.

“You must not be so ready to take alarm at nothing, dear. Oh, I say, Julie,” Cynthia added, piteously, “let’s turn back, or he won’t see us. No—yes. Hark! it’s all right; he has seen us. I can hear his step. Don’t

look round, Julie," she whispered, joyously. "Oh, dear, why it's you, Harry. However did you come down?"

"Train, to be sure," cried the young man, heartily. "Why, you both look brown already. So glad to see you looking better, Julia."

"Well, it was very nice of you to come, Harry. But how's poor Mr. Magnus?"

"Heaps better. I persuaded him to come down with me for a week. I left him at the hotel."

"Oh, you good boy," whispered Cynthia; and then they strolled gently on till they were a long distance from the last houses in the town. The sun made the calm sea shimmer like damasked silver, and in the transparent pools the water was many-tinted with the reflections from the green and grey and yellow cliffs; and, as such people will, both Cynthia and Harry grew more and more selfish, taking it as a matter of course that Julia should grow fatigued and seat herself

upon one of the rocks that had fallen from above, to be ground, and beaten, and polished smooth on one side, while the other was roughened with the limpets and acorn barnacles that crusted it like a rugged bark.

In fact, they forgot Julia in the intense interest of their pursuit as they wandered on, for Cynthia had to be helped from rock to rock, as they went out as far as the water would allow, and she had to make daring jumps of a few inches over rushing, gurgling streams of water that ebbed and flowed amongst the stones. Then the tiny point of her pretty shoe was always poking itself inquiringly into crevices, out of which Harry had to fish red anemones or unusually large limpets or mussels. Then they had a mania for gathering enough periwinkles for tea, Cynthia declaring that she would wriggle them out with a pin and eat them. But when about a dozen had been found, the search was given up for some other pursuit;

perhaps it was a well-ground oyster-shell, all pearly, or a peculiar bit of seaweed; and once, close up under the cliffs where the path was very narrow, and the sea right in, the rocks were so rough and the way so awkward that Harry had to help little Cynthia very much—so much, that if a boat had been passing its occupants would have seen two handsome young faces in extremely close proximity. But no boat was passing to make Cynthia turn so scarlet as she did, hence the marvel; and they went on in their love-dream a little longer, thinking what a wonderfully bright and happy world this was, and how beautiful sea, sky, rock, and beach had become, glorified as they were by their young happy love, when Cynthia suddenly awoke.

“Oh, Harry!” she exclaimed, with the tears in her eyes, “how cruel, to be sure. Poor Julie! Let’s make haste back.”

“Oh, yes. She’ll be rested by now.”

“I was so thoughtless,” half sobbed Cynthia.

“She is so nervous, and she will be thinking she sees that dreadful man.”

“Who is not likely to be here, my darling,” said Artingale, smiling.

“No, but let’s make haste back,” cried Cynthia.

Artingale seemed disposed to loiter, but Cynthia was in earnest, and they hurried back towards where they had left Julia seated on a rock, one of the many scattered about.

It was time they did, for Artingale’s words just uttered were not the words of truth.

CHAPTER II.

THE STRAY LAMB.

“DON’T be alarmed, Cynthia; these rocks are so much alike, and we wandered a good way.”

“But I am alarmed, Harry; I am sure it was here.”

“It does look like the place, certainly,” he said; “but there is another heap further on.”

“No, no, this must be the stone. I remember that little pool of clear water, and the patch of seaweed. Oh, we ought not to have left her!”

Artingale could not endorse those words, for he thought it very pleasant to have been alone with Cynthia for the past ten minutes—half

an hour—hour—or two hours—he had not the slightest idea how long it had been ; but the trouble and dread in her agitated young face were so marked that he began to throw off the good-humoured carelessness he felt disposed to show, and bestirred himself to find the missing girl.

“Give me your hand, pet,” he said, “and let’s get on to the next pile. I am sure we shall find her there.”

“No, no, Harry. The more I look the more I feel sure it was here we left her.”

“Well, perhaps it was, little one,” he said, looking down into the earnest eyes, “and she has grown tired, and begun to walk back. We shall find her sitting down waiting for us.”

Cynthia gave him her hand, and they ran for a short distance over the shingle ; but it was too rough to go far save at a walk, and then, reaching another of the little wildernesses of masses of rock, the result of a fall from the towering cliffs, they searched about

for a few minutes without result, and then walked a little way down towards the sea, so as to command a view back towards the battery and the works at the east end of the town.

There was a man tramping along with a shrimping net over his shoulder, an old lady seated on the shingle under an umbrella, a girl with a yellow-covered book perched upon a stone, and about twenty yards out an elderly gentleman with his trousers tucked up, standing in the water reading a newspaper; not a soul besides on that unfrequented part.

"Oh, Harry!" gasped Cynthia, who was ready to burst into tears.

"Why, you little goose," he said tenderly; "there's nothing to be afraid of. She isn't along here, that's certain."

"And yet you say there's nothing to be afraid of," half sobbed Cynthia.

"Why, of course not. She hasn't gone back, or we should see her somewhere. We

must have passed her. I know she must have gone close up to the cliff, so as to find a shady place. All along here is so much bigger and wilder than any one would think."

"She must have gone up on the cliff, Harry."

"Well, dear," he said, laughing, "you and Julie are the nearest approach to little angels I ever knew, but even you two have no wings, and I don't think Julie would get up the face of that cliff without."

"Oh, pray, Harry, don't talk so, now," she cried; "I'm afraid—I don't know what to think."

"Don't be afraid, little one," he said, encouragingly, "we'll find her directly."

"Is it possible that any of the cliff has fallen, and crushed her?" said Cynthia, piteously.

He started, but spoke the next moment decisively.

"No. Such a fall would have made a noise like thunder. Depend upon it she has changed

her place, and we shall find her fast asleep : unless the Red Rover, or some other dashing pirate, has landed, and carried her off in his yacht."

"Oh, Harry, you make fun of it all," cried Cynthia, with a stamp of her little foot, which crushed a tender, young, and unoffending mussel ; "and I feel now quite a chill of horror lest that dreadful man——Oh, look, look, Harry ! Who is that ?"

She grasped his arm convulsively, and pointed at a part of the cliff, about a couple of hundred yards farther away from the town, where a figure could be seen cautiously climbing from ledge to ledge along the face of the stones, and in a position where a false step or a slip must have meant his falling a battered and bleeding mass upon the shingle beneath.

There was a fascination in the scene that held them breathless, and as Cynthia's hand glided into his, and clung to him convulsively,

Artingale felt the little palm grow wet and cold.

It was a most daring proceeding, and such as none but the most reckless would have attempted; but the man seemed to be coolly climbing on, apparently without effort, though every here and there he had to cling to the face of the rock, and remain motionless, as if to gather breath.

“By George!” exclaimed Artingale at last, as the man climbed nearer and nearer to where the grass was just visible on the topmost edge, “he’s a plucky fellow, Cynthy. I wouldn’t do that for a good deal.”

“But, Harry—don’t you see—don’t you see?”

“Only that he is close to the top, dear. There, don’t look if it makes you giddy. I’ll tell you. He’s close up now, and he has got hold of the grass and stuff. Now he’s over the top edge. He’s safe enough. And, yes—there, you can look up now. He’s all right, and out of sight.”

“But, Harry, Harry,” panted Cynthia, “didn’t you see? It was that man.”

“What man?”

“The man who follows poor Julie.”

“By Jove!” cried Artingale; and he started as if to try and follow the man up the cliff.

“No, no,” cried Cynthia, clinging to him; “don’t leave me, Harry, don’t try to climb that dreadful cliff; come and find poor Julie. Oh, Harry, why did we go away?”

For answer, Artingale ground his teeth, and hurried his companion along until they were in front of the rock on which they had left Julia seated.

Mass after mass lay singly here; and nearer to the cliff huge pieces were piled one upon the other in confusion just as they had fallen from time to time on splitting off from the face of the precipice.

Helping his companion over some of the rough blocks, and threading his way amongst others, Artingale uttered a cry of satisfaction.

"Here she is, Cynthy!" he exclaimed; and then he stopped short in alarm, so strange and haggard did Julia appear.

She was seated upon a piece of rock at the foot of a large shelly mass, her cheek resting on the stone, and her hands pressed to her face.

"Julie, dear Julie!" cried her sister, springing to her side; and as Julia heard her voice she slowly lowered her hands, and displayed a countenance alternately flushed and deadly pale, while her eyes looked wild and strange.

"Has he gone?" she whispered, giving a frightened glance round.

"Oh, Julie, tell me, has that man been here—has he dared to speak to you?" cried Cynthia, passionately.

"Yes; he came directly you had gone. He was there, there," she whispered, pointing towards the cliff. "Take me away: please take me away."

Her words and looks were those of some

frightened child, and on Artingale taking one of her hands she clung to him convulsively.

“But, Julie dear, tell me,” cried Cynthia, whose face was flushed and angry; “tell me——”

“No, no. Not now. Not now. Let us get back to the hotel. I dare not stay here.”

Artingale and Cynthia exchanged glances, as they led the frightened girl out from amidst the piled-up rocks into the broad sunshine, and then slowly along the sandy portions of the beach, with the result that she gradually became more calm, but she checked at once the slightest effort made by her sister to gain any information. Even when, at a sign from Cynthia, Artingale drew back, she did not speak, but turned timidly and waited for him to come alongside.

“Don’t leave me, Harry,” she said plaintively; so he joined them again, and walked with the sisters right up to the hotel, where Julia now seemed to have grown more herself;

but there was that in her countenance which set Artingale thinking very deeply, and as soon as he had parted from the sisters, he went straight to James Magnus, whom he found in his room seated by the open window, and gazing out to sea.

CHAPTER III.

PLAYING DETECTIVE.

“I SAY, old fellow, I’ve got some news for you that ought to make you well in half-an-hour,” exclaimed Artingale.

“What’s that?” said Magnus, eagerly.

“That scoundrel who gave you the ugly cut on the head is down here.”

“Down here!” cried Magnus, with his pale face flushing.

“Yes; and he has seen and insulted Julia Mallow.”

A deadly pallor came over the countenance of the artist once more, as he rose from his chair, and caught his friend by the shoulder.

"Harry," he said hoarsely, "you found out my secret when I thought it was hidden deeply away. You are right; your news does give me strength, and I shall live to kill that man."

"Well, old fellow, I would rather, for everybody's sake, that you were not hung; but I don't wonder at what you say, for I feel just now as if I could shove the beggar over the cliff. But set aside talking, we must act. What is to be done?"

"Let us see Mr. Mallow at once."

"Bah! He would hem and haw, and look rigid, and say we had better leave the matter to the police."

"Very well, then, in Heaven's name let us speak to the police."

"What about, my dear fellow? What are we to say? . Don't you see that we are helpless. The man has kept outside the pale of the law; and besides, suppose we have him caught—if we can—think of the unpleasant *exposé*, and how painful it would be to both of

those poor girls. No, we can't do that. It would be horrible, my dear fellow. Suppose the scoundrel is trapped, and—I only say suppose—gets some sharp, unscrupulous lawyer to defend him. It would be painful in the extreme."

Magnus began to walk up and down the room, looking agitated.

"What would you do?" he said at last.

"Well," said Artingale, after a pause, "I feel greatly disposed to take the law in my, or our, own hands."

"Why do you say *our*?" asked Magnus, hoarsely.

"Because I look upon it as your case as much as mine. Look here, old fellow, Cynthia and I both think you are the man who would make Julia happy, and if you don't win her it is your own fault."

"And Perry-Morton?"

"Hang Perry-Morton! Confound him for a contemptible, colourless bit of canvas—or,

no, I ought to say brass, for the fellow has the impudence of a hundred. A man without a pretension to art in any way pretending to be a patron and connoisseur, and, above all, to be my brother-in-law. Hang the fellow ! I hate him ; Cynthia hates him ; and we won't have him at any price. No, dear boy, we want you, and if you don't go in and win and wear Julia, why, it is your own fault."

Magnus turned to the window, and stood looking out dreamily.

"Faint heart never won fair 'lady, Mag," cried Artingale, merrily ; "and how you, who have always been like a Mentor to this wandering Telemachus, can be such a coward about Julia, I can't conceive. Not afraid of the brothers, are you ?"

"Pish ! Absurd ! How can she help her brothers !"

"Well, then, what is it ?"

Magnus turned upon him slowly, and gazed at him fixedly.

“Harry,” he said, “you love Cynthia?”

“By George! yes, with all my heart,” cried the young man, enthusiastically.

“Yes,” said Magnus, “I am sure you do. Then it should be the easier for you to think of a love where a man looks up so to the woman he worships that he would sooner suffer than cause her a moment’s pain, when, knowing that she does not—that she cannot return his affection——”

“Hold hard. Now look here, my dear Magnus, don’t let sentiment take the bit in its teeth and bolt with you, or else we shall have a smash. Now I say, look here, old man, why cannot Julia return your love?”

“It is impossible. She is engaged.”

“Bah! what has such an engagement to do with it? I tell you I believe that poor little Julia is perfectly heart-whole, and that the flower of her affection—I say, that’s pretty, isn’t it?—I told you not to let sentiment bolt with you, and I am talking like a valentine!

But seriously, old fellow, I am sure that Julia detests Perry-Morton."

"How can you be sure?" said Magnus, gloomily.

"Very easily, my cynical old sage. Don't sisters indulge in confidences, and when one of the confidential sisters has a young man, as people in the kitchen call it, doesn't she confide things to him?"

Magnus looked at him for a moment or two excitedly, but a gloom seemed to settle upon him directly after, and he shook his head.

"No," he said, "it is hopeless; but all the same, Harry, we must, as you say, put a stop to this annoyance. What do you propose?"

"There are two courses open, as Parliamentary people say."

"Yes; go on. You are so slow; you torture me."

"Well, not to torture you then, my dear boy, one course is to get a private detective."

“No, no ; absurd. I’d sooner employ the genuine article.”

“The other is to make private detectives of ourselves, and quietly keep watch and ward over our treasures—eh ? ‘Our treasures’ is good.”

“Yes, that seems the wiser plan,” said Magnus, thoughtfully. “But it will be hard to manage.”

“Where there’s a will there’s a way, my dear boy. You join with me, and we’ll manage it.”

“You would not speak to Mr. Mallow first ?”

“No, my boy, we must take the matter in our own hands.”

“And if we find this fellow annoying—the—the ladies ?” said Magnus, in a curiously hesitating way.

Artingale set his teeth hard, and spoke through them.

“The blackguard’s too big to treat like a

black beetle. But let that rest, and remember the saying attributed to the celebrated Mrs. Glasse of cookery fame—a saying, by the way, that I'm told is not to be found in her book—let us first catch our hare, which in this case is a fox, or rather I ought to say a wolf. We'll decide afterwards how we will cook him."

Magnus nodded, and walked up and down the room in a quick, nervous fashion.

"That's right! that's capital," cried Artin-gale, merrily. "I thought my news would make that sluggish blood of yours begin to move. By George, there's nothing like a genuine love to make a man of you."

"Or a woman," said Magnus, gloomily.

"Get out! Rubbish! Come, come, no retrograde movements: forward's the word. Now the next thing is for the knight to meet the lady in whose defence he was wounded. I'll manage a meeting, or Cynthy will, and if you don't make good use of your time I'll

never forgive you. We'll speak to the Rector after you have won a little on poor Julia. He's a good fellow, and wants his girls to be happy. But by Jove, Magnus, there's nothing like a rattling good crack on the head."

"Why?"

"Excites sympathy. Young lady finds out your value. Why, my dear old boy, you look a hundred pounds better. Here, take your hat, and let's go and have a ramble. The sea air and a bit of exercise will beat all the doctor's tonics."

Magnus said nothing, but taking the cigar offered to him, he lit up, and the two young men strolled off together, along by the sea.

"Show me the place where you left Miss Mallow," said Magnus at last.

"All right," was the reply; "but wouldn't it be better if we went up the cliff and walked along the edge? I want to see where that scoundrel came up; and we might meet him."

James Magnus looked intently in his friend's countenance, and could not help noticing how hard and fixed the expression had become.

"It would not tire you too much?" he said.

"Oh no," replied Magnus, hastily, "let us do as you say."

Artingale noted the flush that came into his companion's face, and he could see that it was more due to excitement and returning health than to fever. And then, saying little but thinking a great deal of their plans, they strolled on and on, leaving town and castle behind, and having the glistening, ever-changing sea on one side, the undulating spread of well-wooded hills and valleys in the Sussex weald upon their left; but far as eye could reach no sign of human being.

"These cliffs are much higher than I thought for," said Artingale at last, as he stopped for a moment to gaze down at the beach. "How little the people look. See there, Mag, those

stones lying below, you would not think they were as high as you? Some of them weigh tons."

"Was it on one of those you left Miss Mallow seated?" said Magnus, eagerly.

"Oh no, quite half a mile farther on, more or less. I don't know, though, seashore distances are deceitful. That was the pile, I think," he continued, pointing, "there, below where you see that dark streak on the face of the cliff."

"I see," said Magnus. "Come along."

"All right, but don't walk so close to the edge. You know, of course, that a false step means death."

"Yes, I suppose so," replied Magnus, going close to where the weathered cliff suddenly ceased and there was a perpendicular fall to the rough stones beneath. "It looks an awful depth," he continued, gazing down as if fascinated.

"Awful!" cried Artingale, "but hang it

all, Mag, come away. You give a fellow the creeps. You are weak yet; suppose you turn giddy."

"No fear," said Magnus, quietly; "but do you know, Harry, whenever I look over from a height I quite realize how it is that some people end their wretched lives by jumping down. There always seems to be a something drawing you."

"Yes, I dare say," cried Artingale, with a shudder, "but if we are to play amateur detectives here goes to begin. Now then, young fellow, move on. It's agin the law to jump off these here places."

He spoke laughingly, and in supposed imitation of a constable, as he took his friend by the wrist, and pulled him away from the giddy edge of the cliff. But the next moment he was serious.

"Why, you wretched old humbug," he cried, "what are you talking about? I've a good mind to go back."

“No, no, let’s go on,” said Magnus smiling, “I was only speaking scientifically.”

“Indeed,” said Artingale, gruffly; “then don’t talk scientifically any more.”

They walked on for some little distance in silence, Artingale keeping on the dangerous side, as if he doubted his friend’s strength of mind, and looking down from time to time for the spot where they had found Julia, and the head of the cliff where Jock Morrison had made his ascent.

“What should we do if we met the fellow?” said Magnus suddenly.

“I don’t know quite,” said Artingale, shortly. “Let’s find him first. Here, look here, Magnus, those are the stones! No, no, those—the grey blocks; and that is where the blackguard got up. By George, however did he manage it? The place is enough to make one shudder—Eh? What?”

Magnus had laid his hand upon his friend’s shoulder, and was pointing to where, about

fifty yards away, a figure was lying, apparently asleep on the short turf, not ten yards from the edge of the cliff; and in an instant Artin-gale had sprung forward, recognizing as he did the man of whom they were in search.

CHAPTER IV.

LET SLEEPING DOGS LIE.

THE two young men had no thought of the consequences that might ensue, as they hurried over the short elastic turf towards where, almost a giant among his kind, Jock Morrison lay prone upon his broad back, his powerful arms crossed upon his chest, and his battered old soft felt hat drawn over his face to shade it from the sun—rather a work of supererogation, for the god of day would have had to work hard to tan it of a richer brown.

Artingale was first, but Magnus was close behind, and as they saw the man before them who had caused so much annoyance to, and so insulted those they loved, the feeling of

indignation in their breasts bubbled up rapidly, and overflowed in hot passion before which that better part of valour known as discretion was swept away. Artingale looked upon the great fellow as something to be soundly thrashed, but Magnus, in spite of his weakness, seemed as if his rage had regularly mastered him. He saw in those brief instants, degrading as was the idea, a rival as well as an enemy, and panting and excited he strove to be there first, so as to seize the fellow by the throat, his weakness and suffering from his late illness being forgotten in the one stern desire to grapple with this man, and look at him face to face.

But Artingale was there first, and shouted to the fellow to get up, but without eliciting any reply.

“Do you hear? Get up!” cried Artingale.

Still the man did not stir, but Magnus noted a slight motion of the hairs of his thick beard, as if his lips had twitched slightly. In other

respects he was motionless, his arms folded across the deep chest and the cap over his face.

"He's not asleep, he's shamming," cried Artingale angrily; and bending down he snatched the hat from the fellow's face and sent it skimming over the cliff, revealing a pair of fierce dark eyes glaring at him like those of some wild beast.

"Now then, young gentlemen! what's the matter?" came now in a deep voice like a growl.

"You scoundrel!" began Magnus, but he had over-rated his strength. His illness had told upon him terribly, and he could neither speak, move, nor act, but pale and haggard stood there holding his hand pressed upon his breast.

"Who are you calling names?" said the fellow fiercely.

"Leave him to me," cried Artingale. "I'll talk to him."

"Oh, two of you, eh?" exclaimed Jack;

"two of you to a man as is down. Well, as I said before, and I say again, what's the matter?"

"Look here, you dog!" cried Artingale, planting his foot upon the man's broad chest, but without eliciting a movement, "I know everything about you, and where you come from."

"Oh, do you?" said the fellow with a chuckle. "And so do I know you. You're a game preserver from Lincolnshire."

"Never mind who or what I am," cried Artingale, who felt in his excitement as if he had never spoken worse in his life; "but just you listen to me, you scoundrel. I know how you have followed and insulted those two young ladies."

"What two young ladies? I don't know anything about two young ladies."

"I know that you have watched for their coming, and, knowing that they were unprotected, you have tried to alarm them into

giving you money, I suppose, and so far you have escaped the police."

"Ho!" said the fellow, making Artingale's foot rise and fall, as he indulged in a rumbling chuckle; "it's a police case, then, after all? Lawford magistrates?"

"No, not now," cried Artingale, angrily. "Keep back, Magnus, I'll manage him," he cried; "you're not fit. I say, it is not a police case now."

"Oh!" growled the fellow, laughing defiantly, "what may it be, then?"

"A thrashing, you dog, for if ever there was a time when a gentleman might dirty his hands by touching a blackguard it is now."

"Ho! it's a leathering is it, your lordship!"

"Yes," cried Artingale, "it's a thrashing now, you great hulking brute; and after that, if ever you dare approach those ladies again—if ever you speak to them, or look at them, or annoy them, directly or indirectly, either here

or down at home, I'll half kill you, and hand you over afterwards to the police."

"Ho, you will, will you?" said the fellow, mockingly.

"And I—I——" cried Magnus, bending down and approaching his pale, passion-distorted face to that of the great robust scoundrel at his feet.

"Yes, I see there's two," growled the fellow. "And what 'll you do?"

"I'll shoot you like a dog!"

There was something horrible in the intensity of hatred and passion contained in the low, hissing voice in which these few words were uttered; and as he lay there and heard them the great ruffian's brown face became of a dirty grey. But the look of dread was gone on the instant, and his chest heaved as he indulged in a mocking burst of laughter.

"All right," he said; "fire away, and if you do kill me, I'll come when I'm a ghost and see you hung. There, be off both of you.

This is free land. This isn't Lawford, and I haven't been taking any of your lordship's rabbuds this time."

"What are you doing here?" said Artingale.

"Doing here!" said Jock, musingly; "why don't you know I'm a Lawford man?"

"Yes; I know that," cried Artingale.

"Well, my parson's down here; I miss him when he comes away."

"Get up, you scoundrel!" cried Artingale, throwing off the brown velvet coat he was wearing, and taking off his watch and chain.

"Not I," growled the fellow. "There's lots o' room for you to pass, man, and 'taint your path. That's the gainest road back."

"Get up!" roared Artingale, rolling up his sleeves over his white arms. "Do you hear?"

"Oh, ah! I can hear," growled the fellow.

"Get up, then."

"Not I. It's comfortable here."

"You cowardly ruffian, get up!" roared Artingale.

"Nay, it's not me as is the coward," said Jock, coolly. "You're two to one. Besides, I don't want to hurt your lordship."

"Get up!" roared Artingale again, but Jock did not move, only lay there gazing mockingly in his face, making the young man's blood seem to seethe with rage.

"Get up!" he roared once more.

"Weant!"

As the word left the ruffian's lips, Artingale's passion knew no bounds, and before his companion realized what he was about to do, he had given Jock Morrison a tremendous kick in the ribs.

The effect was instantaneous.

With a roar like that of an angry bull, the fellow scrambled to his feet, and as Magnus sprang forward to seize him, he struck the artist full in the chest, sending him staggering back to fall heavily, *hors de combat*, for he was as weak almost as a child.

It was the work of moments, for even as he struck Magnus he turned upon Artingale, receiving two heavy, well-directed blows, dealt in good scientific style right in the jaw and cheek, but making no more of them than if they had been slaps from the open hand of a boy, as he caught the young man in a tremendous grip like that of a wrestler, and swayed and struggled with his adversary to and fro, roused now to a pitch of rage that was murderous.

Artingale knew it. He read it in the fierce eyes so close to his, as he felt himself crushed against the great fellow's chest. He read it in the grinding teeth, and felt it in the hot breath that came full in his face, and he put forth all his strength and all the cultured activity gained in lessons of the best athletic school. But it was all in vain, for he felt as helpless as a boy in the giant's grip.

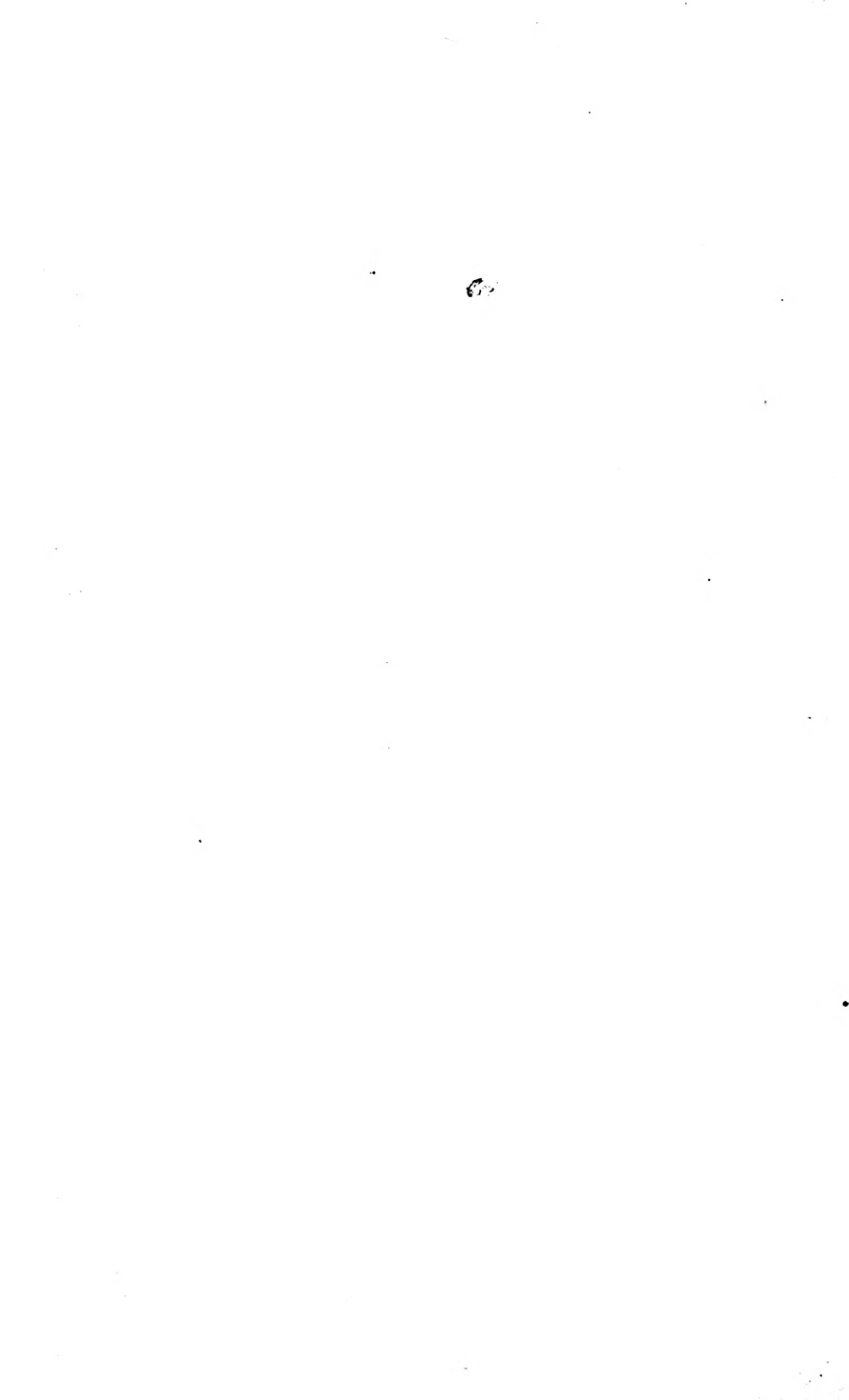
It was but the work of moments; a few struggles here and there, and the knowledge

forced upon him of the scoundrel's murderous aim before Artingale felt himself swung from his feet as they neared the cliff, and then, in spite of his manhood, he felt his blood turn cold.

He roused himself though for a supreme effort, and clutching his adversary with all his might, he strove to recover his foot-hold.

But no—he was mastered. He could do nothing but hold on with all his might, as he mentally swore that Jock Morrison should share his fate.

Vain oath, vain effort! There was a swing, a jerk, and what seemed to be a paralyzing blow upon his muscles, as he was forced away from his hold, and the next instant he was falling headlong from the cliff-edge into the void beneath.



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